

Red alert from Brazil: Toward a comprehensive, intersectional and context-based framework for the guarantee of academic freedom^{1 2}

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1. Introduction

Brazil has entered, in the last years, the warning map of deteriorating conditions for academic freedom internationally. However, the situation is still in the margins of public debate and neglected by official data. Scholars and civil society organizations have reported increasing threats to academic freedom and violent attacks on the higher education and research community, including scholars, students, staff and institutions over the past few years (Observatório do Conhecimento, LAUT and SBPC, 2022; Scholars at Risk – SAR 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021; GPPI 2020). This deterioration of academic freedom as a human right in Brazil has also adversely affected academic communities and people in different and intersectional ways, depending on their contexts. Although the promise of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to democratize the education system brings a lot of hope to public institutions, the current scenario demands urgent attention. Lula, who is known for important democratic education programs in his former administration, won the presidential election in October 2022, and will face a challenging landscape.

“SOS Brazil: science under attack” was the headline used by the prestigious magazine *The Lancet* in 2021 to account for the growing hostilities against the scientific and academic community in Brazil. Under that title, epidemiologist Pedro Hallal, former dean of the Federal University of Pelotas, published an open letter denouncing the systematic official harassment and persecution of those academics who, through their research, question public policies harmful to the country. In his letter, Hallal, who was also a target of harassment because of his findings regarding Covid 19,³ denounces the dramatic attacks against science in Brazil since the beginning of Bolsonaro's presidency in 2019, with budget cuts and negationist discourses (Hallal 2021: 372). Hallal emphasizes that the government's assaults have led Brazil to be the second country in the world with the highest number of deaths by Covid-19.

Since then, recent studies have shown a further decline of academic freedom. According to a survey conducted with higher education faculty, researchers, and graduate students to evaluate violations and threats, 58% of the respondents reported knowing people who have experienced undue limitations to, or interference with, their research or classes (Observatório do

¹ This policy brief is the result of joint research work carried out between August 2021 and August 2022, which was supported by the Mellon Foundation and Scholars at Risk's Academic Freedom Fellowship.

² Our deepest thanks to all research interviewees in Brazil from Pará, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and the Federal District, who, without knowing us, trusted us with their life stories and often difficult and painful experiences, and shared their perspectives and knowledge with us. We would also particularly like to thank Chelsea Blackburn Cohen, Robert Quinn, Irv Epstein, Débora Medeiros, Amanda Mendonça, Kasia Kaczmarska, Rosana Kordylas and Danielle Pamplona for their valuable comments and suggestions regarding this policy brief.

³ Pedro Hallal was the principal investigator of Epicovid-19, the largest epidemiological study of Covid-19 in the country. In its nationwide study, the research team found marked regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, as well as a six-fold difference between official statistics and estimates on the real number of infected people. These findings were not well received by the ministry of health, and funding for the study was discontinued in July 2020.

Conhecimento, Centro de Análise da Liberdade e do Autoritarismo LAUT et. al. 2022: 2). Additionally, between 35% and 42% of the respondents (Idem, p.5) affirmed they were forced to restrict or modify aspects of their own research and the content of their classes for fear of retaliation. Furthermore, 43% of respondents rated their institutions' procedures for dealing with reports of threats to academic freedom as poor or very poor (Idem: 7).

Repressive practices such as the use of governmental powers to erode university autonomy, the judicialization of scholars who publicly express critical points of view, as well as growing threats and online harassment, are increasingly affecting the safety of higher education and research communities in Brazil. In fact, according to the Academic Freedom Index, Brazil shows a serious decline in the levels of academic freedom in the country from 2011 until 2021 (FAU & V-DEM 2022: 4). Nevertheless, there is a structural lack of protection measures, as actually envisaged in the Brazilian Constitution and international treaties signed by Brazil, along with a lack of official data collection and broad public debate on the subject. This scenario, which will be discussed in detail below, is one of the main reasons for this study with a focus on the Brazilian case.

In methodological terms, the research was divided into two main methods for data collection: the first step was based on the selection of secondary sources: scholarly literature on academic freedom, press articles and NGO reports. The second step utilized primary sources of data through semi-structured interviews. This technique provided a general guideline yet enough leeway for freely formulated answers, which in turn led to new questions. Moreover, the methodology was informed by feminist approaches that allow the identification of layers of power and privilege not previously evidenced, pointing to additional ethical questions that usually are unveiled in this process (Ackerly and True 2010). This research used a qualitative hybrid methodology, based on digital and face-to-face fieldwork. From October 2021 until April 2022, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with relevant actors and experts from different cities in Brazil such as Rio de Janeiro, Manaus, Brasília, São Paulo Pelotas, Belém and Santarém. Interviewees included university authorities, researchers and lecturers at risk and in exile, experts involved in academic freedom initiatives, scholars in various career stages who have experienced censorship, disruption or other attacks as a consequence of their work, and students. Interviewees were recruited by using the snowball sampling approach (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981; Atkinson and Flint 2003). In this technique, an initial interviewee- often, a key informant- provides the name of another potential interviewee, and so on. This sampling strategy takes advantage of social networks and can be quite efficient in contacting new interviewees involved in the topic. Resorting to social networks as a means of contacting victims of violence or aggression are key, since when the interviewer is recommended by another person of trust, it favors the predisposition and openness to the interview.

In their analysis of the context of increasing offline and online violence against scholars, some studies have noted that an anti-science perspective has been stimulated as part of the neoliberal project in the 21st century (Santini & Barros, 2022: 4; Latour, 2020). They recognize it as part of an attempt to reduce spaces for critical thinking and stop processes of democratization. In fact, as discussed below, starting in the 2000s, some progressive governments promoted a process of inclusion of marginalized groups by improving access to higher education and research. These groups have now also become a target of attacks and restricted academic freedom. For this reason, an intersectional approach is crucial to evaluate the limits to academic

freedom not only in scope, but on the subjects and social groups affected. Several studies and scholars have stressed how social stratification and divisions of class, race, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, sexuality and other kinds of marginalization are reflected in the access, position and treatment of marginalized groups and individuals in the higher education system (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016: 12) and how in many cases, university dynamics contribute to reproducing those inequalities over time (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990).

Over the past years, however, academic freedom has become one of the main targets of the ongoing hostilities, together with the independence of the judiciary, the freedom of the media, and the space for civil society organizations. This phenomenon has been termed by scholars and policy makers as “shrinking space,” “disabled environments” (Van Tuijl 2000), and “restricted operational space” (Borgh & Terwindt 2012), with some even referring to a “closing space” (Albrecht 2017), in particular, for drastic cases in which there is no civic space for civil society action and the exercise of academic freedom. This situation is not unique to Brazil. Other regions in the world have also become the stage for attacks against academic freedom, as is the case with Turkey, where in the past years many scholars have been under disciplinary investigations, some have had to leave the country and others were arrested (Altıparmak & Akdeniz, 2017; Amnesty International, 2017; Özkirimli, 2017). However, when it comes to the Brazilian case, the situation has not gained much visibility yet. People working in academia are not usually perceived as a group at risk, as other civil society actors such as journalists, trade unionists, or human rights and environmental defenders clearly are. This invisibility is reflected both in the limited research and production of knowledge on the subject and in the lack of adequate measures to protect at-risk scholars and their communities.

Indeed, the lack of in-depth studies and research on the topic of academic freedom in Latin America in general and in Brazil in particular is noteworthy. While there are some important NGO reports addressing and denouncing the increasing undermining of university autonomy and academic freedom in Brazil in the past years (SAR 2019, 2020, 2021, GPPI 2020), the theoretical reflection and analysis of patterns of aggression, their evolution over time, and the responses of higher education stakeholders are still under researched. What is more, there are no studies of how universities respond to attacks on academic freedom and respond in these cases to protect their own scholars and students who are threatened. In addition to all of the above, it is important to mention that the data collected refers mostly to public higher education institutions. The scenario in private universities is a data void.

In most of the countries, governmental bodies and academic institutions are usually unresponsive to threats and attacks faced by scholars. Indeed, it is striking that there are no protocols or guidelines in place for these cases either at the governmental or academic level. To address these research and policy gaps, this policy brief aims to evaluate some of the most common university responses—as well as their outcomes—in dealing with their own scholars facing risk in Brazil.

Divided into four sections, this policy brief will provide recommendations for academic institutions to protect and support scholars at risk and promote and strengthen a culture of academic freedom. The first section draws on the multiple dimensions of attacks on academic freedom and scholars over the past decade, especially in the past four years in Brazil. The second section analyzes the national and international legal framework for the protection and

support of academic freedom as well as states' obligations in this regard. The third section sheds light on the ambiguous role of universities and academic institutions when dealing with practices of harassment, violence or public statements and authorities' accusations against their staff. Finally, the last section provides recommendations for the prevention of attacks and the protection and support of scholars at risk in Brazil as well as for the promotion and strengthening of academic freedom.

2. The multiple dimensions and impacts of attacks on academic freedom in Brazil

The case of Brazil is a very particular one since, while it formally corresponds to a democracy, it features strong authoritarian tendencies and diverse forms of oppression and intimidation. Many of these tendencies have been identified as part of the former far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro. They were evidenced by, for example, the presence of the largest number of military personnel in the Ministry of Education (as well as in other ministries) since the military dictatorship. Since 2019, Brazil has witnessed a rise in the number of killings and criminalization of political, human rights and environmental activists (Global Witness 2021: 12) as well as an increase in the level of judicial and online harassment against researchers, students and scholars. In many cases, these attacks are the result of state actions either carried out under the guise of legality, through the use of the judiciary, or reinforced by the deployment of other forms of control and surveillance. Thus, during the government of Jair Bolsonaro, restrictions on democratic institutions, civil liberties and academic freedom jeopardized the work of critical stakeholders and scholars, stigmatizing and positioning them as dangerous actors against moral conservative values and economic and political interests that were presented as being of "national interest," endorsing the persecution of scholars and academic institutions (Lima & Yamamoto 2022).

This scenario is closely intertwined with the degradation of different human rights and offers a view of the increasing attacks against researchers that produce critical knowledge on these topics. Over the past decade, academic freedom and the country's higher education and research community have come under intense pressure. Former president Jair Bolsonaro frequently used derogatory rhetoric to disparage scholars and deploy an array of strategies to restrict academic freedom. Through executive orders and the powers vested on ministers, the Bolsonaro administration also sought to punish and exert greater control over higher education institutions. As SAR's *Free to Think* reports (2021, 2020, 2019) point out, over the past five years, Brazil has become one of the countries in Latin America with the highest levels of violent attacks on university campuses against student protests, as well as targeted aggressions against critical scholars and professors.

Interestingly, in many cases a clear link can be identified between the types and causes of activism that come under more frequent attack and the topics of research and teaching. In fact, at least 27 activists were killed in Brazil in 2021 (Front Line Defenders 2021: 5). Most of the activists killed and threatened are those linked to the defense of human rights, environmental, land and indigenous peoples' rights, and nearly always in the context of megaprojects, the extractive industry, and big business as well as the defense of women's and LGBTQI+'s rights (Front Line Defenders 2021). These thematic axes are also often the target of attacks on academic freedom and scholars. Many of those academics that teach, research and/or express themselves critically and publicly on issues related to gender-based violence, LGBTQI+ rights, environmental and judicial policies, and even health policies in the context of the pandemic,

are at risk of becoming the target of various forms of attacks, such as aggressions in social networks, judicial harassment, public governmental criticism and persecution and even assaults on physical integrity, just to mention a few (SAR 2020, 2021).

In this context, the lack of information on academic freedom from a gender and intersectional perspective is also striking. When it comes to the deployment of aggressions against scholars and academic freedom, it is crucial to include an intersectional analysis in order to understand attacks on specific marginalized groups, so that those cases are not taken as random or individualized (Hill Collins 2017; Hill Collins & Bilge 2016). Thus, it is necessary to examine interlinked oppressions and their impacts on people facing their gendered, racialized and classist forms. In addition, Mwenza Blell et al (2022: 2) offer an intersectional approach that also addresses interlinked scenarios of precarity, neoliberalization, internationalization, digitalization, and various forms of increased surveillance, censorship and self-censorship, as well as cultures of silencing, to show that women and people of color are affected by the attacks on academic freedom in specific ways. Informed by these perspectives, the case of Brazil is an important field for further investigation and examination of the process of deterioration of academic freedom in marginalized groups in society such as women of color, Indigenous women and LGBTQI+ people. An intersectional perspective also helps to shape protection measures to guarantee academic freedom.

Another of the worrying dynamics that is seriously affecting and restricting academic freedom in Brazil is the lack of access to official information. In the past years, the Bolsonaro administration has implemented different actions intended to reduce the transparency of public information. For instance, the government issued the Decree No. 9690 in 2019 that allowed increasing the number of authorities with the power to decide which public government information should be classified as confidential.⁴ In addition, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government restricted the Law on Access to Information (Committee to Protect Journalists 2020). In March 2020, the deadlines for replying to requests for access to information established by law were suspended by the government. The Federal Supreme Court reestablished them, however, one month later. Such governmental restrictions on information infringe Brazilian legislation, specifically Law No. 12527 of 2012, which guarantees Brazilian citizens access to public documents of the Executive, Judicial and Legislative bodies, at the federal, state, provincial and municipal levels. Effective for ten years now, this law has played a significant role in monitoring the production and dissemination of official data in Brazil and ensuring government transparency and the implementation of public policies, for instance in the Education sector. Therefore, it could also play a key role in understanding the landscape of academic freedom in the country.

2.1. Attacks on academic freedom yesterday and today: continuities and ruptures

While increasing hostilities on scholars, including researchers and lecturers, evidence a process of deterioration of academic freedom in everyday life in Brazilian universities and research institutions, restrictions and attacks on critical scholars are not totally new in the country. The Global Public Policy Institute's collective report on academic freedom in Brazil (2020: 5)

⁴ Further information about the 10 years of Brazil's Law on Access to Information is available at <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2022/05/lei-de-acesso-a-informacao-faz-10-anos-cria-raizes-e-tem-arcabouco-sob-ataque.shtml>. Last accessed on 10.17.2022.

identifies four periods in recent Brazilian history that account for well-marked and differentiated socio-political contexts that provide conditions either more likely to support and strengthen academic freedom or to restrict it: the first and most dangerous period for academic freedom refers to the 21-year-long military dictatorship (1964–1985). This period was marked by censorship and repression against critical scholars and student movements in a systematic way. A second period covers from re-democratization until Dilma Rousseff's impeachment (1988–2016), in which there were relevant advances in the implementation of affirmative actions and policies such as quotas and programs for financial support to enable the access of historically marginalized groups in Brazil to higher education (Ibid. 2020,6). The third period refers to the interim government of Michel Temer, (2016–2018) in which anti-leftist uproar significantly increased; and the fourth period started after the election of Jair Bolsonaro, from 2019 until the present, when the already existing wave of conservative movements and the “anti-rights” social climate against science and academic freedom was further intensified by governmental acts and rhetoric.

As in other Latin American countries, the period of the military dictatorship is identified as one of the most violent against academic freedom and the right to safety of critical scholars and students' movements and unions, especially in public universities (Valle 1999). Many scholars were systematically persecuted, accused of belonging to “subversive groups,” arrested, dismissed from their positions, or forced to retire. According to the Brazilian National Truth Commission, at least 72 university professors and 61 scientific researchers were forced to retire or fired (CNV 2017: 169). Many scholars and students were also victims of extreme violence such as torture, arbitrary detention and execution, or enforced disappearances, deforced exile (GPPI 2020: 7, CNV 2017: 56, 84, 365,).⁵

While Brazil is currently governed by democratically elected leaders under a constitution which provides for democratic institutions and guarantees, increasing incidents and attacks on academic freedom over the past years are reminiscent of the authoritarian ideas and practices from the military dictatorship period (GPPI 2020: 7). As shown below, the current delegitimization of teachers and academic work has translated into a general hostility toward science and higher education.

⁵ Although the final report of Brazil's National Truth Commission, published in 2014, gives an account of human rights violations against professors and students, it examines them in a general way, as one more targeted group among many, without giving special attention to the multiple regional dynamics and impacts on academic freedom. Thus, in recent years, several universities have created their own truth commissions to investigate past human rights violations in their own institutions. They have documented and reported abuses. For instance, in the case of the University of São Paulo (USP), the truth commission's final report stresses that most of the cases of persecution and rights violations against their staff and students were based on ideological reasons during the dictatorship (Comissão da Verdade da USP 2018 vol. 1: 7). The practices reported include the denial of positions for certain teachers and blockades of specific student enrollments. Ideological sorting (or screening) of students, professors and other university staff was implemented with support from agencies such as the Special Adviser for Security and Information (AESI). The report of the USP Truth Commission points out that the AESI produced numerous reports that were disseminated to the Armed Forces, the National Forces, the National Intelligence Service (SNI), the State Department of Political and Social Order (DEOPS) and the police. In many cases, surveillance resulted in death, disappearance, work deprivation, prohibition of enrollment, and interruption of academic research in the institution (Comissão da Verdade da USP 2018: 8).

Since the government of Michel Temer, the socio-political conditions for academic freedom have become very complex and challenging and have further deteriorated under the Bolsonaro administration. Along with his praise for the dictatorial regime of 1964–1985 (Phillips, 2019), Bolsonaro’s government has often undermined the relevance of freedom of expression and attacked the role of the media and academia— sometimes by institutional means, but mostly by amplifying depreciative discourse (GPPI 2020, SAR 2020, 2021). Just prior to and following the October 2018 presidential elections, the police carried out raids on Brazilian campuses, questioning faculty, and confiscating or ordering the removal of “political” materials posted on campus. Individual scholars and students—particularly those from marginalized communities—were threatened and harassed, while others faced violent attacks.

The 2018 presidential elections were a drastic turning point for academic freedom and for the country's higher education community. Since he took office, Bolsonaro and his administration have sought to exert control over higher education and research institutions, through budget cuts⁶ as well as emergency decrees aimed at giving himself and his minister of education greater power in the rector appointment process and altering federal universities’ own system of rector elections (SAR 2021: 18).⁷ At the same time, individual scholars and students have suffered different kinds of threats and forms of harassment as a result of their work, views and identities. Some of the recurrent patterns of intimidation of critical scholars involve the use of the legal system and actions exerting pressure on university actors and, in several cases, criminalizing them. Most scholars have resisted these attacks through publications, networking, and advocacy (GPPI 2021: 4). Nevertheless, many cases depend in large part on judicial decisions and social mobilization.

The official contemptuous and restricting attitude toward research became evident in the context of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 since Bolsonaro himself was known for his negationist position regarding the severity of Covid-19 [which he called the “little flu” (gripezinha)] and his rejection of the vaccines. He even discouraged the population from taking the vaccine by saying: “If you turn into a crocodile, it's your problem” (AFP 2020). In this context, researchers working on the effects of Covid-19 or on the vaccines to combat it were constant targets of attacks and defamation by the ex president Bolsonaro and his public officials through various means such as public speeches and social media.

The deployment and use of accusations functions as a rhetorical strategy of governmental authorities to delegitimize and stigmatize researchers’ work, especially when it questions, either directly or indirectly, the policies and official positions of the former president Bolsonaro. These attacks encompass Covid-related research as well as other topics such as environmental issues that contradict official policy. For instance, Ricardo Galvão, director of the National Spatial Research Institute, was dismissed from his position after presenting and commenting on data on deforestation. Another prominent case is that of Larissa Mies Bombardi, a geographer and professor at the University of São Paulo, who was threatened and persecuted

⁶ Some press articles have documented the budget cuts and the responses to them in the country. The cuts affected not only universities, but other levels of public education institutions. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/31/students-protest-across-brazil-over-jair-bolsonaros-sweeping-cuts-to-education>. Last accessed on 08.20.2022.

⁷ Such decrees include a Provisional Measure (PM) issued amid the covid-19 pandemic crisis, which conferred on the Minister of Education the authority to appoint pro tempore rectors and vice-rectors at federal universities, without any kind of consultation with the institutions.

due to her research on the effect of pesticides in food production and consumption. In 2021, Bombardi decided to leave the country and continue her research abroad. In an interview with a German media outlet, she declared that “scholars are facing threats as in the dictatorship.”⁸ Thus, the self-exile of researchers and university professors has become one of the main consequences of the above-mentioned hostile context for academia, as well as the consequences of their exile, either imposed or self-imposed. According to the data of the organization Scholars at Risk, it has received, since its foundation in 1999, 52 requests for support from Brazilian professors. Of those requests, 48 were received after the beginning of the latest presidential campaign, and mainly after the election of the former president Jair Bolsonaro. One of the most renowned cases was that of anthropology Professor Débora Diniz, whose work focuses on reproductive health and the right to abortion. Diniz had to leave the country in 2018 after receiving threats of violence and intensive online harassment.

However, it is estimated that the figures of those in exile are much higher. In fact, several of the scholars interviewed for this research were abroad since they had to leave the country due to hostilities against them, a situation described by them as one of “self-exile,” although they do not have an official refugee status at the country of arrival. In turn, while some in extreme situations of harassment have left the country, this is not possible for everyone. Many researchers who would like to move away from their context (even within Brazil itself) cannot do so since they lack the necessary financial, logistical or social resources and, as shown in section 4, they do not have support from the institutions in which they work to help them relocate to other universities—elsewhere in Brazil or abroad—until the hostile situation subsides. Moreover, it is important to highlight that exile is also not an option for many scholars for other reasons, such as access to foreign languages and connection to the territories where they live, among others.

3. Academic freedom, legal Frameworks and Institutional obligations

Paradoxically, the concept of academic freedom is not well known or used in the Latin American context. Hence, the implications of the restrictions on academic freedom are also frequently ignored. The concept was officially defined/coined in the 1997 UNESCO Statement on Academic Freedom as “the right [of scholars and professors], without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom, of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies” (UNESCO Statement 1997, Art. 27). Thus, academic freedom refers to the right of universities and individual scholars to conduct research, teach, disseminate the findings of their work, and participate in public debates and express their opinions, even on matters that may be politically sensitive, without being targeted for suppression. Academic freedom enables academics not only to produce new knowledge and base the university curricula and their teaching on the most up-to-date scientific findings but also to participate in public debates, thereby improving the democratic competence of societies at large.

⁸ The interview was published by the German public news service Deutsche Welle and is available at <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/pesquisadores-vivem-amea%C3%A7as-como-na-ditadura/a-58613148>. Last accessed on 08.10.2022.

Academic freedom is protected by national legislation and international human rights law. The exercise of academic freedom is closely linked to the exercise of civil rights as citizens “including the right [of scholars and professors] to contribute to social change through freely expressing their opinion of state policies and of policies affecting higher education. They should not suffer any penalties simply because of the exercise of such rights” (UNESCO Statement 1997, Art. 26). Some recent changes in international conventions also expand the notion of academic freedom, such as General Comment No. 25 issued by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) in April 2020. General Comment No. 25 builds on Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which covers various aspects of the right to science, highlighting the role of freedom as crucial for academic research (Kinzelbach et. 2020: 2).

Science has also gained more and more space in the public debate concerning the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Against this background, the lack of academic freedom was framed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression as an ancient and “contemporary tool to repress information and ideas that Governments often find threatening” (UN, 2020: 21). According to the report, academic freedom is described as a basis of democratic life, scientific progress, as well as human development. Additionally, the violation of academic freedom constitutes an attack against freedom of opinion and expression (UN, 2020:4).

In December 2021, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)—along with its Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression and its Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural, and Environmental Rights—issued a Declaration of Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy. The declaration marks an advance toward the improvement of protection and safeguard mechanisms for academic freedom in the Americas. In its declaration, the IACHR expressed its concern about allegations made in various countries in the Americas regarding repression against student groups and student unions; the harassment, attacks, and budget cuts affecting academic institutions; and other forms of retaliation against members of academic communities based on arbitrary or discriminatory measures. In this connection, one of the most important points highlighted by the Declaration is the duty of the state to prevent and investigate these acts, punish the perpetrators, and ensure adequate protection and reparation measures to the victims (e.g., principles 5, 6, 9, 16). In turn, the declaration highlights that the responsibility for developing prevention and protection measures not only lies within states, but universities and academic institutions should also take affirmative action in order to ensure the exercise of academic freedom. However, as shown below, this is not the case so far in Brazil.

Brazil is bound not only by international legal instruments that establish the state’s duty to provide protection for academic freedom and to guarantee a safe and supportive environment for the work of the higher education and research community, but also by national legislation. Brazil’s Constitution contains express protections for academic freedom, noting that “[t]eaching shall be provided on the basis of...” the “freedom to learn, teach, research and express thoughts, art and knowledge” (Article 206.2) and institutional autonomy (Articles 206 and 207). Similarly, the Law No. 9396 of 1996, known also as *Directrices Básicas Educación Nacional*, proclaims that education in the country shall be based on “the freedom to learn, teach,

research and disseminate culture, thought, art and knowledge” (Article 3.2). Furthermore, Brazil is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which provides for the right to freedom of opinion and expression (Article 19), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which provides for the right to education (Article 13) and calls on state parties to “respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity” (Article 15(3)).

Additionally, the right to access information should guarantee that Brazilian citizens can follow the implementation of public policies related to the above-described rights. The transparency of information from governmental bodies would then have a key role in the development of mechanisms for ensuring academic freedom. The above-mentioned Brazilian Law No 12527, known as the “Right to Information Law,” entered into force in 2011 and requires public institutions to respond to requests for information within 20 days, with a maximum extension of up to 10 days. This law is one of the main mechanisms in the country that implements the right to access information, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indeed, according to the Universal Declaration, access to information is considered an integral part of the right to freedom of expression, as recognized by Article 19, defined as the freedom “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”⁹ Since 2018, however, as described above, several government actions have significantly curtailed access to information of data that should be public according to the Constitution.

In sum, despite existing obligations under human rights law to protect academic freedom and scholars at risk, state bodies, universities and academic institutions in Brazil do not seem to be taking the necessary measures to address the current situation of widespread harassment and protect scholars, as discussed in the next section.

4. The ambiguous Role of Brazilian academic institutions

The role of academic institutions in Brazil—comprising both universities and research institutes—is often ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, academic institutions, especially public ones, are undoubtedly victims of various types of attacks, whether implemented through political interventions on their autonomy, budget cuts, or police raids on university campuses. On the other hand, in most cases in which members of their educational community, that is, professors, researchers and students, are subjected to harassment or aggressions, institutional responses tend to be “lukewarm,” null, and can even result in the revictimization of those affected. While they are bound to issue proactive measures to support those attacked, academic institutions do so only reluctantly and in a vague manner, if they do anything at all. As explained below, this lack of an (appropriate) institutional response, which combines very limited action in some cases and a total lack of action in others, by academic institutions results in three types of consequences for the scientific and educational community in Brazil: 1) the revictimization of those who have been a target of harassment or aggressions, 2) improvisation as an institutional practice due to the lack of protocols and adequate

⁹ For more information see <https://www.unesco.org/en/communication-information/right-information/access-information-laws>. Last accessed on 10.01.2023

prevention, support, and protection measures, and 3) the individualization of their own security/safety.

4.1. The revictimization and unequal exposure of those at risk

The various attacks on researchers, professors, and students, and with them, on academic freedom in Brazil, are aggravated in most cases by a lack of adequate action by the academic institutions to which they belong, as well as a lack of protocols to follow. Most of those interviewed expressed their great disappointment at the treatment and reactions of their institutions and the authorities for the attacks suffered. When asked how they defined these reactions, the interviewees mentioned indifference or no reaction at all, minimal symbolic support with some internal communication in the university or of a public nature, responsibility and/or questioning of the person suffering the hostilities (in some cases administrative procedures were even opened to investigate the victim and the content of her/ his classes and/or research), and the granting of temporary leaves, which, in many cases, was unsolicited. The interviewees reported isolated cases of support from departments of the educational institutions, but even in those cases such support did not include the authorities. This leads to a situation where the desired result is reversed, to the effect that harassment escalates from individuals to entire research groups, including researchers in more vulnerable situations. This occurred in cases in which research coordinators were targeted and started searching for help from higher levels of representation inside the universities. Even if they were provided with support for those specific cases, hostilities would go on by targeting other researchers, including junior researchers and even graduate students that are in less protected positions in academic hierarchies. Along these lines, some testimonials point out that people coming from marginalized groups are more targeted inside research groups, which again highlights the presence of different layers of oppression operating in an intersectional manner.

In the majority of cases, a communication of support is all the support that was provided, which is a symbolic one without any subsequent concrete measures. Without intending to diminish the value of such supportive reactions, such as public pronouncements rejecting the threats and aggressions, which are indisputably necessary, they should be considered as the minimum standard to adopt. However, they are not sufficient. In most of the cases, institutional support excludes other types of assistance/aid, whether legal, financial, or psychological. These reactions (or inactions) on the part of academic institutions only contribute to aggravating the impacts of the aggressions suffered and revictimizing those who suffered them.

When institutions neglect attacks on scholars, students, and academic freedom at large, this not only sends a negative message to the academic and scientific community that they are unprotected and “on their own,” but it also entails that the victims of attacks become victims for a second time: the first time as victims of the aggression or harassment, the second time as victims of the institutional system that is incapable of action. This is particularly difficult for victimized scholars and one of the main reasons why many of them remain silent for years. In cases in which the academic institution opened internal procedures to investigate the causes of the attacks by investigating the work of the victim, they ended up generating conditions prone to the stigmatization of the victim. The victims’ effort to overcome their fear to report these kinds of incidents in their institutions or even in court goes unrewarded. In other words, the lack of adequate institutional responses might lead to a *secondary traumatization* of the victims. Sabine Rupp (2003), who analyzes the damage caused by the actions of institutions in their responses to various cases of violence, defines *secondary traumatization* as damage that

occurred, not at the hands of the immediate perpetrator of violence, but indirectly through the behavior or actions of the occupational groups involved, persons in contact with the victims, or state institutions and agencies—in our case, the academic institution or university.

4.2. Improvisation as an Institutional Practice: the lack of prevention and protection standards/protocols

Along with reactions of indifference to situations of harassment, most of the interviewees stressed that even in those cases in which the institution showed a certain willingness to support them, it was characterized by total improvisation. Although as previously described (see section II), attacks on academic freedom and scholars in Brazil have increased in recent years, universities react to each case as if it were "the first time." Among the at-risk scholars interviewed, those who suffered threats and judicial harassments reported that their institutions did not know what to do and that they even asked those affected what to do. Although it is crucial to consider and include the perspectives of those at risk in evaluating support measures, institutions should not transfer their responsibility for providing an array of possible options/actions to the victims, who in many cases do not necessarily have the experience or knowledge about possible resources and are in a situation of emotional stress due to the attacks.

The reasons for the lack of roadmaps or protocols are manifold and interrelated. The first of them is the invisibility, minimization, or normalization of the severity of the situation of vulnerability experienced by those who have been victims of harassment and intimidation. While attitudes of denial do not recognize any situations of restriction or risk to scholars, attitudes of minimization and normalization tend to recognize their existence while underestimating their seriousness. During the interviews, some justifications and conflicts about the acknowledgment of the problem emerged, with expressions like: "it is a minor problem," "not as serious as the one suffered by activists who are on the front line," "it is normal to be attacked if one works on certain issues," "it is normal if scholars expose themselves and publicly criticize the government," etc. Those expressions were repeatedly part of the feedback some of the interviewees received, while exchanging their experiences with colleagues or looking for support. This minimization or normalization of aggression and harassment is usually a common phenomenon in contexts in which violence is experienced as a daily reality.

As previously mentioned, Brazil is among the countries with the highest rates of attacks on human rights defenders and activists and, like many countries in the region, it has suffered chronic and structural violence for years (Pearce 2006 Galtung 1969), including high numbers of homicides, kidnappings, robberies, threats, discrimination, corruption and high rates of social inequality and exclusion. Violence is thus part of the daily life of many sectors of the population, which leads to normalize it, to learn to live with it and in many cases to build real or emotional walls of insensitivity to the suffering of others. In a context of overexposure to violence, the notion of "serious risk" is often linked to extreme damage to physical integrity, thus making invisible the multiple physical, emotional, mental, professional, and social impacts on the lives of those who have become targets of judicial and online harassment and public accusations by the authorities. The invisibility and normalization of restrictive and intimidating practices is a worrying issue in the case of individual scholars, but it becomes even more serious

when those who normalize violence are the academic and state institutions, whose duty is to address the problem. The normalization of attacks by academic institutions and authorities usually results not only in a failure to recognize the seriousness of the problem but also in a

lack of solidarity and empathy with the victims and in the non-implementation of protection and support measures.

Another of the most frequent arguments advanced to justify the inaction and the absence of protocols for these cases is the lack of budget, as was particularly highlighted in interviews with university authorities. While it is true that the education system in Brazil has major budget problems, which have been aggravated by cuts and threats of more cuts by the Bolsonaro government over the past years, the budget is not just a financial issue. The allocation of economic resources (including personnel, offices, logistical aspects, material resources, etc.) is linked to the political will of the institution, which is in turn derived from the relevance assigned to the problem in question.

4.3. The Individualization of security

The lack of appropriate institutional support for threatened scholars leads not only to their revictimization but also an excessive overload, as they suddenly find themselves dealing with the different impacts of the aggressions in their lives. This involves a displacement of the responsibility of the state and academic institutions toward the victims, who usually need legal advice and representation, psychological and medical support for themselves and their families and financial assistance, among others.

As a result of legal accusations or constant harassment in social networks and in public, many of the scholars interviewed stated that they had to pay the costs for legal advice and representation, as well as professional psychological support for themselves and their families. In several cases, due to the fear that the threats would intensify, several interviewees stated that they had to take various security measures in their homes, such as installing security cameras. All this resulted in an emotional and financial overload for which they had no institutional support. In fact, some interviewees commented that when they urged their institutions to assist them in dealing with these expenses, most of the institutions declined to do so, implying that it was a "personal" issue and denying that the situation of vulnerability was the result of the victim's research or teaching activity. In referring to this situation, one of the interviewees said, *"they left me alone."*

In this sense, criteria of class, race, gender, and ethnicity also play a key role and highlight layers of challenges in dealing with the scenario of attacks. In an interview with an Indigenous student at a university in the Brazilian Amazon, she said: *"for us, the difficulties add up. Not only is there no protection in the case of attacks, but scholarships for Indigenous peoples and Black people suffered different financial cuts in the past years. In other words, our permanence in the Brazilian university has suffered several attacks."*

Institutional omissions/inactions are not only limited to the financial aspect but also encompass much more of an empathic, logistical, and operational type of aid. For example, if it cannot grant support itself, the institution could provide some accompaniment by giving information and contacts in national or international organizations or contacting people who can provide that information. In most cases in which the interviewees received some support, it came from university unions, which in some cases provided free legal advice.

Most researchers, however, report an isolation in trying to find out how to deal with forms of online and offline harassment and searching for protection measures. *“I’ve suffered many virtual attacks and I had to deal with them alone, closing my social media accounts and stopping my publications about my research results,”* said an interviewed scholar. Women researchers and LGBTQI+ people report specifically forms of attacks that are more personal and relate directly to gender and sexual orientation. *“Some attacks are on my body, threatening me of, for example, sexual violence,”* said another female researcher. Both point out that these situations do not occur with their cisgender male colleagues in similar circumstances.

As mentioned above, some scholars have been forced to leave the country to avoid harassment and, in those cases, funding and professional networks play an essential role. However, Brazilian universities do not seem to be prepared for these cases either. There are no inter-university cooperation programs between Brazilian or Latin American Universities (or with other regions) to enable those who have suffered threats to relocate for a certain period to other academic institutions, so that they can go on with their academic work and have financial and logistical support. It is fundamental that the home institution supports threatened scholars in the search for exit options that allow them to continue with their personal and professional life under safe conditions and that, at the same time, consider their specific situation and the impact of the stress suffered by them. However, Brazilian universities have been unable to provide such support. Several interviewees stated that they had to look for options on their own by using their personal contacts in other countries or building new ones, which in many cases was extremely difficult. Even when the scholar at risk gets some scholarship or financial aid to be received by an institution abroad, this first support in the host country is precarious and usually for a short period of time, ranging from 3 months to 2 years at best, without many more sustainable possibilities – especially because of the way many of these university systems in the global north work, with a series of temporary contracts. In turn, the fact that scholars have spent a couple of years abroad does not mean that the security situation in the country of origin has improved, so the person cannot return when the support program ends. As a result of such difficulties, many scholars in exile have been unable to continue with their academic work or are now unemployed. This has undoubtedly aggravated their situation of vulnerability and stress.

Once more, the absence of institutional intervention leads to the intensification of the already existing differences of class, gender, ethnicity, and other intersectional discriminations in the impact of violence and the strategies that each scholar can implement to address them. In these cases, it is noticeable that those researchers from renowned universities—especially those located in the South and Southeast of the country— with a knowledge of foreign languages and more university degrees and international contacts, have much more social capital to face protection and care measures than those who work in universities or institutions in other regions, such as the North, for instance in the Amazon region. As result, academics that work on more local issues and belong to historically marginalized groups in Brazil have fewer possibilities of support. This factor also calls into question the perspective from which academics at risk are provided with protection. Interviewees identify what some have called “an elitist” character in some protection measures, as they do not consider the different contexts and livelihoods. In another interview with a professor from a university in the Amazon area, the concept of protection was described as the result of an apparently *“neutral point of view, which carries the perspective of white men from urban areas.”*

In this sense, many of the scholars at risk interviewed who live in rural environments pointed to the lack of support options for them to continue to work and live in their territories or in the same region, rather than being relocated. “*My life is connected to the territory where I live, we need a kind of support that understands that,*” said one interviewee, an Indigenous graduate student.

Finally, it is crucial to stress that restrictions and attacks on research and higher education harm not only the individuals directly targeted or the institutions where they teach, research and study, but also entire societies. They shrink everyone’s space to think, question, and share ideas freely and safely, impairing public discourse and damaging social, political, cultural and economic development. The state has a key role in safeguarding the values and practices of academic freedom in its multiple dimensions. In this sense, there are valuable documents and reports from various organizations with recommendations for states to protect academic freedom in Brazil (see e.g., SAR 2021, GPPI 2020). However, more specific recommendations are needed for research and higher education institutions to help them to create a proactive institutional framework that can guarantee academic freedom. To address this gap and based on the data collected in this research in Brazil, the following measures are recommended for strengthening an academic environment free of violence and full of respect for diversity and democratic values as well as knowledge creation. The effective implementation of the recommendations described below would support and enhance the defense of academic freedom at the local level and create adequate conditions for its protection and promotion inside and outside the research and higher education community.

5. Recommendations:

A) For higher education institutions, universities and research centers

5.1. Recommendations for the prevention of attacks and the promotion of an academic freedom culture

- 1) Open space for debate and research that provides an understanding of academic freedom as a human right from Latin American perspectives, considering the different and diverse realities scholars face in a region marked by high levels of socio and economic inequalities. The inclusion of anti-colonial and decolonial analyses, for example, and approaches to democratic education from the lens of the region's diversity is crucial for protection and guarantee of a more democratic academic freedom in diverse and unequal Latin American contexts.
- 2) Contribute to creating and disseminating a culture of academic freedom among professors and lecturers, students, and staff of the institution through workshops, trainings, and publications.
- 3) Academic institutions should have specific offices to document attacks on researchers, teachers, and students. This is fundamental as it allows compiling statistics and determining the systematicity and modalities of attacks, conducting a diagnosis and preparing support strategies accordingly.
- 3) Create an office or position in the university specializing in the subject of prevention and protection of at-risk academics to provide advice and support. This position / department can

also be responsible for conducting risk assessments, in case an individual scholar or a research group is required.

4) Develop intersectional approaches in all activities related to disseminate academic freedom such as protection protocols, teaching and awareness activities related to the topic, training and publications.

5) Universities should have a prevention mindset in the design and implementation of protection measures (as opposed to reacting to specific instances of attacks as if they were isolated cases). A preventive approach involves the development of protocols that must be activated in cases of aggression and adapted to each particular case. This includes an acknowledgement and implementation of “lessons learned” from strategies that were effective in previous cases, whether they were adopted by the same institution or by other institutions. There should also be a commitment to revisiting protocols in light of new circumstances or evidence, and a commitment to transparency when policies are being reconsidered/debated.

6) Create spaces for exchange, dialogue and cooperation with civil society organizations that have extensive experience in the prevention and treatment of violence.

7) Strengthen articulations among universities, both nationally and internationally, and other academic institutions to deal with the problem.

8) Universities must offer training to all their personnel (administrative staff, researchers, professors and students) on academic freedom and protection and security strategies in case of grievances.

9) Universities should take an active role in raising awareness about the problem of scholars at risk through the organization of public events such as panels, roundtables and conferences, as well as the preparation of reports and written material for dissemination.

10) Monitor data collected by governments and push for the guarantee of Access to Information contained in Law 12527 on Access to Information. This can include ensuring access to reports sent from universities, national data on registered cases of violations, public policies, budget and so on.

11) Support studies that aim to amplify and discuss issues related to academic freedom, as well as its connections with other topics on freedom of expression.

12) Map and find alternatives for preventing both online and offline attacks and develop or improve data privacy settings that should protect sensitive information, in collaboration for instance with departments inside the universities that are specialized in the matter.

13) Generate disaggregated data from an intersectional perspective, instead of only general data, that can help identify the most affected groups and different forms of attacks.

14) Support equal access to universities, regardless of class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, including through mapping obstacles to student permanence and their intersections with lack of academic freedom.

15) Reaffirm the importance of freedom of research, teaching and learning as integral to a democratic society in statements, transdisciplinary projects and others.

16) Support studies / analysis to identify the main profiles of people who are targeted by attacks against academic freedom

B) Recommendations for the Protection of Academic Freedom

1) Create and/or allocate an annual budget or emergency fund to provide concrete help to threatened academics. As mentioned above, due to the characteristics of the attacks, they must usually cover the costs of their protection strategies (including forced departure from the country, as well as possibilities of permanence for those whose livelihoods are more connected to the territories where they live, for instance Indigenous scholars and researchers from other of the many traditional peoples and communities that exist in Brazil) and suffer economic losses.

2) Provide public support for researchers at risk through public statements made by authorities and press releases.

3) Provide legal advice and representation to harassed researchers and professors.

4) Offer psychological support to threatened academics or at least provide advice as to where this support can be found. Psychological help should also be discussed together with mental health academic departments inside the academic institution where such departments exist.

5) Support and protection measures must have a gender and intersectional perspective considering the differential consequences of violence. Protection and support measures must include a gender and intersectional perspective since the effects of violence are different according to gender and other factors, such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, family situation, social situation, stage of academic development/career (e.g., with or without PhD), etc. Support and protection strategies must consider these variables in each case.

6) Academic institutions should build a database of support organizations, programs and scholarships as well as of specific financial support for academics at risk. This database must be accessible and disseminated by the university to all its members.

7) Build inter-university cooperation programs between Latin American Universities: Universities must promote specific cooperation programs with other universities in their own country, in the Latin American region, and elsewhere to allow threatened scholars that need to leave the country to be hosted and supported by other universities and continue their academic work. It is fundamental that the home institution supports scholars in the search for exit options that allow them to continue with their personal and professional life under safe conditions and that, at the same time, consider their specific situation and the impact of the stress faced by them. The authorization of categories such as “postdoctoral research stint”—normally used to leave the country—does not cover all the specific needs of a person who has suffered harassment and attacks. Hence, another legal device needs to be created for threatened scholars to access programs that enable them to work in the new country/region and provide them with psychological, logistical and other resources as well as academic support at their host university.

8) Set up cyber protection measures to avoid break-ins in online classes and attacks on social networks, as well as establish a protocol for documenting those cases.

9) Engage in and encourage regular dialogue with other university communities and civil society organizations whose mission is to protect higher education communities and promote academic freedom.

10) Open spaces to discuss and contextualize academic freedom from a local perspective, as well as narrative formats of communicating about the topic for people at all levels of educational institutions.

11) Engage with the local community outside the academic community, with the aim of raising awareness about the importance of the role of universities and their independence.

12) Revisit the country's history and document instances of attacks on academic freedom, as a way of building memory, based on cases such as that of the Comissão da Verdade from Universidade de São Paulo (USP).

C) Recommendations for the Brazilian Government

1) The Brazilian government should adopt and effectively implement the inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy across the country.

2) Allocate funding for universities to implement the above-described steps.

3) Create mechanisms for the documentation of violations of academic freedom and provide reports annually on the situation in the country.

4) Guarantee access to information, in accordance with Law No. 12527 on Access to Information, by giving the population access to all the data collected, as well as to information on government budget allocations, public policies and so on.

5) Abstain from direct or indirect involvement in violations of academic freedom or attacks on higher education of any type, including by encroaching upon university autonomy, through violent or coercive means, legislative or administrative actions, or travel restrictions.

6) Conduct effective and transparent investigations of attacks on higher education and research communities and make all reasonable efforts to hold perpetrators accountable.

7) Take all necessary measures to ensure adequate security for all members of higher education and research communities.

8) Generate disaggregated data from an intersectional perspective, instead of only general data, that can help identify the most affected groups and different forms of attacks.

9) Develop intersectional public policies that protect marginalized groups inside universities, considering inequalities of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity that shape social hierarchies in the country and erode academic freedom.

10) Explicitly recognize the importance of academic freedom in public statements, policies, and actions.

11) Raise academic freedom at different levels of political dialogue, including in human rights dialogues and consultations with partner countries.

12) Engage in and encourage regular dialogue with university communities and civil society organizations whose mission is to protect higher education communities and promote academic freedom.

13) Map existing support and protection mechanisms for human rights defenders to develop the capacity to identify and provide assistance in cases involving attacks on academic freedom, including through physical protection, legal and visa support, trial and prison monitoring, as well as psychological support in public health institutions.

14) Take integral measures to protect and support the safe permanence of students and researchers from marginalized groups within Brazilian universities.

15) Map the impact of austerity policies carried out in recent years, such as budget cuts described above, on academic freedom and democratization of public education.

16) Support the creation and implementation of programs on the promotion of democratic education and academic freedom values not only at university level but also at the intermediate and basic education level.

D) Recommendations for the international community (academic and civil society organizations)

1) Strengthen cooperation with Latin American countries, addressing gaps in data that result from underreported cases. This includes guaranteeing funding for Latin American research and participation in joint international research.

2) Improve programs that support scholars at risk from Brazil and the entire Latin American region, through scholarships granted to academics in exile and those working in their territories, sharing practices on protection measures.

3) Develop programs / funding and collaborative research with scholars that research the topic of academic freedom in the Latin American region.

4) International organizations working on and for academic freedom should adopt a broader approach, opening space for more perspectives from Latin America and other regions from the Global South, through international articulation, conferences, and support for research projects.

5) For international academic research: Partner with universities to strengthen research on political groups attacking academic freedom worldwide and support scholars and research groups that map their activities.

6) Networks of scholars should demonstrate support for institutions, staff, and students under attack, and raise the issue at different levels, such as in visits, international events and statements.

7) Create international efforts to follow information on trials and judicial processes against scholars under attack.

8) Support equal access to the academic community, regardless of ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, disability, and others.

9) Highlight that attacks on academic freedom can also take the form of cyberattacks, as academics today increasingly make use of the internet and social media to express their ideas and opinions.

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