

The Opinion Pages | CONTRIBUTING OP-ED WRITER

Life as a Brazilian Woman | APRIL 23, 2014

SÃO PAULO, Brazil — Can a misogynistic country have a female president? Brazil proves that the answer is yes. More than three years into the administration of President Dilma Rousseff, not much has changed for Brazilian women. Feminism is still often viewed as ridiculous extremism. Misogyny is rationalized or dismissed as irony, while rape is trivialized, or even excused.

A few years ago, a famous Brazilian comedian joked about the ugliness of victims of rape he saw protesting on the streets. “Why are you complaining?” he asked. “The men who did this don’t deserve to be imprisoned, but hugged.”

Some claimed it was just a joke, but it clearly revealed what Brazilians think about that topic: Come on, men and women are equal now; there’s no need to make such a fuss.

Only that’s still very far from the truth. According to a recent survey by the Institute for Applied Economic Research, 26 percent of Brazilians agree that women who wear revealing clothes deserve to be assaulted. In the same poll, 59 percent said they thought that there would be fewer rapes if women knew how to behave.

Each year, Brazil sells a hyper-sexualized Carnival to tourists, treating women’s bodies as a national attraction. A news website called G1 recently presented its readers with a quiz: “Whose breast is this?” There were close-ups of nude or seminude breasts from the Carnival parade and readers had to guess to which celebrity they belonged. (I got four answers right out of 10. But then I looked at my own and got a little depressed.)

Ours is a nation obsessed by beauty and slenderness à la Gisele Bündchen. Brazil is second only to the United States in the use of plastic surgery, with 1.5 million operations a year. If you become slightly overweight, Brazilians will comment; you will feel bad about your body and start hesitating in the shadows around swimming pools, like a shy hippopotamus.

Lately there’s been an explosion of fitness bloggers whose jobs are — in theory — to give tips on health. But they face frequent accusations of

actually being paid to advertise weight loss products like fat-burning supplements and diet shakes. Their websites tell us that a “negative” belly is the key to happiness.

But this pressure is largely directed at women, and men face much less criticism about their looks. Also their salaries are higher than ours; I earn 35 to 50 percent less than my male colleagues, although we cannot say for sure it is a gender issue. Maybe it’s just lack of talent.

Considering how much public attention is paid to the shapes of bellies and breasts here, and how much of the tourism industry is built on Brazilian beauty, the country is oddly sensitive when it comes to other countries objectifying Brazilian women in the very same way. For instance, it seemed a bit hypocritical when, recently, Brazil’s tourism board told Adidas to stop selling two World Cup T-shirts because of their sexual connotations. One of them had the message “I Heart Brazil,” where the heart was an upside-down buttocks of a woman wearing a thong. The other shirt displayed a girl in a bikini and the slogan “Lookin’ to Score.”

Back in 2002, the tourism board also complained when “The Simpsons” made fun of our country by portraying Brazilian TV shows for children as hosted by seminude women doing sexy moves. (It also portrayed taxis that changed their signs to “hostage” — which was considered an outrage, though I personally found it funny.) A few weeks ago, “The Simpsons” aired another episode about Brazil and the World Cup; it showed a lot of gangsters, corrupt officials and, again, seminude presenters of children’s shows. So far there hasn’t been an official statement, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there was.

But all this is a side note compared with matters of much more serious concern. At major tourist destinations like Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, sexual exploitation, trafficking of women and child prostitution are urgent problems. According to Unicef, there are 250,000 children forced into prostitution in Brazil.

Women struggle daily against sexual harassment, domestic violence and emotional abuse. Here in São Paulo, according to the United Nations, a woman is assaulted every 15 seconds. We’ve recently seen an outbreak of sexual harassment cases in the subway; a feminist group even handed

out needles to female passengers, advising the women to defend themselves.

Furthermore, a 2011 government report found that 43 percent of all women have suffered some kind of violence in their own homes. Many victims, even those with higher education, are too afraid to report the abuse.

More than seven years ago, the government enacted a federal law increasing the punishment for domestic violence against women. Since then, the “Maria da Penha Law” — named for a woman whose husband shot her, leaving her a paraplegic, then tried to electrocute her when she returned from the hospital, and still remained a free man for two decades — has had positive results. But there’s still a lot to be done.

Here, as in other parts of the world, there’s nothing like the knot in the stomach women get when walking alone at night, when passing a group of men who suddenly stop talking. There’s nothing like being afraid of your own husband. These are the kinds of moments when Ms. Rousseff doesn’t do us any good.

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