

Another View: A Brazilian soap star gets scrubbed by scandal

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By Mac Margolis, Bloomberg

As goes Jose Mayer, so goes Brazil? Graying and gallant, the 67-year-old actor has been one of Brazil's most enduring leading men for the giant Globo television network. But much like the rakes and cads he's played in beloved soap operas, Mayer apparently let his urges get the best of him and sexually accosted a costume assistant, who spoke up and caused a national commotion.

Now, despite his belated apology, Mayer has been suspended by Globo, pilloried by feminists and publicly shamed on social media, with many of the studio starlets he shared the stage with joining the pile-on. It's yet more evidence of how Brazil is changing, and that the country's old guard must adapt or be crushed in the fury.

The rare comeuppance of a cherished screen idol in macho Brazil -- a land where celebrity too often confers a kind of offstage droit de seigneur -- was already something of a milestone. What's also interesting has been the willingness of the nation's most powerful broadcaster not just to sacrifice one of its most valued breadwinners but also to engage its brand in the civic outcry. Across the programming grid last week, the network encouraged debate about sexism and invited actresses to its studios sporting stylish protest T-shirts: "Mess with her, you mess with all of us." "Clearly, Globo turned the incident into a marketing event," Gabriel Priolli, a communications consultant and longtime television producer and critic, told me.

Of course, notwithstanding Globo's billboarding of just causes and anti-discrimination in its storylines, the code of conduct that Mayer is said to have violated was long the rule at the network. (It reportedly had been handling the complaint internally until the studio assistant quit and went public.) In short, Brazil's overhauling of its outdated attitudes is still very much a work in progress. But over the last few decades, demographic upheaval, a changing workplace and shifting family values have been refashioning the role of women in this country of 202 million.

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Although women still get paid less than men and are underrepresented in electoral politics, they have logged important advances. If once a woman's place was in the home, rearing children, plunging fertility has reduced family size and freed up women to join the workforce. By 2013, women represented nearly half (44 percent) the Brazilian labor market; the wage gap also is gradually falling, with women pulling down 76 percent of what men earned in 2015, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, the census bureau. The World Bank reported in 2013 that just over 59 percent of Brazilian companies were run by women.

They also have outpaced men in education, with girls studying longer and performing better than boys. Women with high school degrees outnumber men and are the majority among university students. The extra classroom hours have paid off; women publish close to half of scientific papers in Brazil and made up 49 percent of the country's scientific researchers between 2011-2015, up from just 38 percent from 1996 to 2000.

Such industry may explain in part why women have fared better in Brazil's recession, adding 9 percent to their income in the last quarter of 2016 compared with the year before, according to data compiled by economist **Marcelo Neri**, who studies social policy at the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Rio de Janeiro. During the same period, heads of household (who are mostly male), and working children saw their earnings plunge by around six percent each, **Neri** said, citing 2016 household census.

"We talk about social revolutions, but the most important one of all may be the female revolution," **Neri** told me. "Women have broken out of the home and from their role as care providers and joined the workforce. This is part of a new Brazil."

TV Globo got that a while ago. Strong women who dominate alpha guys and battle a host of macho creeps for a stake in a lopsided society have long been a staple of telenovelas. "Law of Love," the last soap that Mayer starred in, was full of them; in fact, after making a host of women miserable, Mayer's character ends up in a hospital bed from a massive stroke. On screen, it seems, Brazil is a Potemkin village of gender parity. Now if only they could solve that problem backstage.

