

Transgenero en Brasil

Brazil is both Latin America's largest nation, and also the fifth largest country in the world—in terms of both population and physical size. While it is quite a developed country, it is not the most queer-friendly place due to its strict ideas on masculinity and problems with AIDS outbreaks stemming from sex work operations. Distaste for the LGBTQ community is evident in the high murder rate of its members. Transgendered people are generally the target of these hate crimes, resulting in the alarming statistic of one death every three days.

The term "transgender" in our society serves as an umbrella term for all gender variants. Transgender people, or transgenro in Brazil refers to male to female cases. And within transgenro there are two distinct categories: transsexuals and transvestites, or travestis. The groups are easily mixed up by outsiders but to individuals within, the notion of that they are one and the same is preposterous.

The one massive similarity that creates the confusion is that both groups live and dress exclusively as women 100% of the time. They both take on feminine names, pronouns, mannerisms, and cross-dress everyday. Both make permanent changes to their bodies in efforts to appear more feminine. However transsexuals believe that they were born in the wrong-gendered body and make changes, such as genital reassignment surgery, to actually identify as women. Travestis do not identify as women and they condemn transsexualism as a mental illness. They do not attempt to change their sex. Most travestis are poor, gay, effeminate boys that do not have much of a chance otherwise in life.

I have chosen to examine the life and culture of the travestis on the streets of Brazil. Just in the large cities of Rio de Janero and Sao Paulo alone, they number in the thousands. Due to exposure from their high numbers, they lead a notorious yet underground existence full of danger and oppression.

First and foremost it should be noted that the definition of a travesti is not completely synonymous with our definition of transvestite. Travesti comes from the word travestir meaning to cross dress. However the travestis do not merely cross dress from time to time. Travestis present themselves as women through adopting feminine names, pronouns, clothing, etc and making

changes to their bodies through the injection of hormones and industrial silicone. They take on feminine mannerisms and practices such as talking about boys, being very picky about their appearance and watching soap operas. Remember the important distinction: they never, ever identify as women. They are very firm in the fact that they not only differ from transsexuals, but that transsexuals are psychologically ill. Travestis identify as homosexual males who fashion themselves up to be objects of desire for straight men. They are sometimes compared or referred to as veados or effeminate men also known as "faggots".

Whereas the generally accepted gender identification method in the U.S. originates at one's genitals, Brazil's gender binary is based off of one's sexuality. Whether or not someone is a man, woman, or veado is dependent on one's position in sex. If one penetrates, he is a man. If one gets penetrated, she is a woman or veado regardless of genitalia. Interestingly travestis take on both the passive and active roles in sex demonstrating their dual gender capabilities. Most travestis are street prostitutes who see a clientele of mostly men. With these clients travestis take on the active role because of the general desire of the client to be passive with a partner who looks like a woman. But when travestis are with their boyfriends, they are strict in their demands to be treated like a woman and therefore to be passive in sex. In fact, if a travesti's boyfriend were to engage with her penis, the travesti would see the boyfriend as a veado and dump him for a 'real man'.

Travestis are born poor and generally do not make it out of poverty. They tend to live in the poorest as well as most dangerous part of town. Most live in three by four meter rooms that are not secured or very clean. It is extremely common for travestis to have an altar with a Catholic religious figure such as Jesus or Virgin Mary in their room. They practice their faith in spite of the fact that the Catholic community and most other religious communities do not accept them, the exception being the Afro-Brazilian religious community.

Carnival, an Afro-Brazilian festival which incorporates gender inversion in its over the top rituals, is the reason behind this lone acceptance. Each year male en travesti are at high visibility at this festival, on billboards, and in magazines. There are even entire groups dressed as women. However these men are merely dressing in drag and would not actually want to be called travestis. But this event does serve as a reference to them and some do come out and participate.

However since travestis cross dress all year around, it is less of a fun event for them. And sadly as discrimination levels rise, some travestis get scared away by people who are intolerant. Unfortunately the majority of the population of Brazil engages in these acts of discrimination and intolerance.

Because travestis are stereotyped as dirty, dishonest, mentally ill, violent, and diseased criminals, they are completely excluded from Brazilian culture, often living in 'hermetically sealed worlds'. They are actually one of the most despised and marginalized groups in Brazil and are hated by both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Brazil is already not a gay friendly country and the gay population dislikes the negative image the travestis put on homosexuality. Because of this and their deviant life style, travestis often fall victim to extreme brutality and abuse by the police, gangs and the general populous.

Sadly the travestis are aware of the discrimination and have somewhat internalized this tainted image of themselves. They often tend to approach each other with doubt, precaution and cattiness. At the same time they remain defiant in their own stance that they are radical gays who are forcing society to accept their sexual orientation. Unfortunately Brazil is a country that lacks laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Therefore travesti face severe discrimination on a daily basis and some don't even go out in daylight due to safety concerns.

Police brutality, gang violence and passerby insults are the most common forms of harassment and abuse the travestis have to deal with. They do sometimes fall victim to extreme tragedies such as random assassinations by police or drive by shootings. However due to lack of power within Brazilian society, little can be done. As a result of harsh discrimination in school most travestis are forced to drop out at an early age. For this reason many travestis are uneducated and in some cases illiterate. Therefore it is near impossible for travestis to obtain a job that has influence in society such as a doctor, lawyer or other professional. In fact, their lack of education practically keeps them from joining the workforce altogether. The combination of having social-reject-status and being uneducated makes it impossible to change the oppressive conditions of the travestis. So with the middle and upper class jobs being cut off most travestis become street sex workers for life.

In the poorer regions of Brazil workers start as young as twelve. However, in bigger cities the optimal age to begin working the streets is around sixteen or seventeen. They commonly start at an early age due to health problems that can lead to short life expectancy. Most travestis believe their good looks will run out at a young age so they begin working young as an attempt to procure some kind of security for their life after age thirty. As far as health issues go AIDS is a huge problem within the travesti community and is very easily spread through unprotected sex between the travesti and male clients who then go on to spread it to their wives. Sexually transmitted diseases run rampant and undetected due to the underground, lawless nature of the travesti community. Another problem is unregulated drug use and addiction. The biggest problems causing short life spans however are the health risks resulting from the extensive and dangerous body modifications that travestis undergo to look more like women. These modifications are illegal and generally not regulated or administered by a licensed doctor.

The most dangerous modification is that of pumping industrial silicone into their bodies everywhere from their knuckles to butt to cheeks. There are many serious risks involved including dropping of the silicone to the ankles, rejection of the silicone by the body, leaking into the bloodstream and development of serious diseases such as lupus and connective tissue disease. Travestis can have up to twenty liters at a time of silicone injected into their bodies. It is injected by other travestis called bombardeiras or pumpers that are specialists (not licensed doctors) at pumping silicone into others' bodies. Another harmful body modification is the mass usage of hormones that goes completely unregulated. One travesti speaks of injecting a month's worth of hormones into her butt everyday. Signs of the uneducated life of the travestis abound when one examines the decisions that they make regarding their own bodies. It is amazing to what extent travestis will go to look good and succeed as a sex worker.

Travestis have fewer options than female prostitutes and work almost exclusively on the street where they often endure violence, pimping and trafficking. Beatings, intimidation, torture, and shootings are the norm at the hands of sadistic clients who seek out travestis to hurt them. Sometimes travestis attempt to fight the system and play into their criminal image by committing violent crimes against their clients, which in turn sparks more police brutality. Street pimps are also known for beating up their prostitutes over money issues.

Pimping is almost unavoidable as most prostitutes have to pay a pimping fee in an area to whatever pimp has rights there. In turn the pimp is supposed to offer protection from other pimps and the police. Female prostitutes have male pimps called cafetoes whereas travestis generally answer to pimps called cafetinas who are also travesti. Cafetinas run boarding houses for the travestis and pay the cafetoes for unattained street rights. Sometime a worker has to pay both a cafetina and cafetoe to work in an area where tricks don't cost much. These fees can be a huge burden and some workers have to pull sixty tricks a month just to break even with pimping and boarding fees. Thankfully cafetinas and their travesti workers do not entertain a relationship built on fear and intimidation as in the case of females and their pimps. Cafetinas provide support and guidance and usually act as a parent-like figure and often strongly discourage criminal behavior and drug use.

Trafficking is another major problem within the travesti community. The cafetinas start the process by sending their workers to major cities to work the streets and get various body modifications including pumping and possibly surgery. The travestis are then sent to other cafetinas in European countries like Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain and Portugal. However they are not sent directly to their destination. They first are flown to an intermediate destination so they can enter the intended country undercover. The receiving cafetina then finds work, either on the street or in a brothel, and shelter for the travesti prostitutes.

In some cases the travesti is not able to afford the body modifications and/or travel therefore she is financed, complete with sky-high interest rates, by the cafetina. However once the debt has been paid off the worker is free from any particular cafetina's rule. Most become addicted to drugs or get infected with a sexually transmitted disease when finally on their own; those who don't fall prey to addiction or disease have a reasonable chance of going back to Brazil and buying a house and/or car. It is also common for them to send money to the family that expelled them. The percentage that is capable of such autonomy is very, very low and does not represent the majority of travesti workers in the world.

Part of the reason that travestis have a bad image in the public eye stems from the fact that non lower class citizens of most cultures tend to dehumanize prostitutes. We rarely treat them as real, honest workers trying to make a living the only way that they know how. We also never let them take the

prostitute label off even though most attempt to conduct a normal life when off duty. As mentioned above, travestis often have heterosexual boyfriends that they spend time and have sex with when off duty. They also entertain guests in what little space they have and often socialize, somewhat cautiously of course, with each other. This shows that even though the general populous marginalizes travestis and only sees them for their trade, travestis attempt to lead a worthwhile life while stuck in such a lose-lose situation.

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