



A group of transgender revelers in Brazilian soccer outfits at the São Paulo gay parade in 2006. Image courtesy Barry Michael Wolfe.

## Transsexuals of Brazil

by Barry Michael Wolfe

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Transgender people in Brazil are the country's single most marginalized group. Fear, ignorance, and hypocrisy lead to discrimination and lack of education, which in turn render transgender people--more specifically, people who were born male but present themselves as female--subject to violence, social exclusion, drug abuse, crime, prostitution, exploitation, and severe health risks, each of which results in further discrimination.

Brazilian sexual culture contains deep and severely repressed androgynous elements. Transvestites, as many male-to-female transsexuals prefer to be called, are the personification of this cultural equivocation.

### Definitions

While the term *transgender* as used in the United States and Europe has come to encompass all gender-variant individuals, including female-to-male transsexuals, drag queens and kings, and intersex individuals, in Brazil the social phenomenon of *transgênero* largely consists of individuals who were born male but who live their lives as women.

Transgender people in Brazil fall into two categories: *travestis* (i.e., transvestites) and transsexuals, although for many the two terms are interchangeable. To the extent that the latter insist on distinguishing themselves from transvestites, it is because transsexuals consider that they were born into the wrong body, whereas transvestites do not experience as deeply internal conflicts in relation to their male bodies.

In practice, both transvestites and transsexuals make commitments to living and dressing exclusively as women, and are accordingly distinguished from "drags" (i.e., classic transvestites) in two respects. First, drags dress and appear as men in normal life and only "mount" themselves as women in specific situations. Second, transvestites and transsexuals generally make significant changes to their bodies, often through massive hormone intake, silicone enhancement, plastic surgery, and, sometimes, sex reassignment surgery, whereas "drags" do not.

"Transgender people" is the translation of the Portuguese generic term *transgênero*. The term underscores the fact that these individuals are, indeed, people--often highly sensitive, intelligent, creative people--who are routinely stripped of the most basic consideration as human beings.

### Discrimination

Transgender people in Brazil face discrimination and humiliation, usually beginning in early childhood when they first appear to be different. At schools, they are obliged to use their natal identity or be referred to by a number. The most immediate result of this discrimination is that the formal education of most transgender people extends little beyond basic literacy, and a considerable number are, in fact, illiterate.

As they grow older and have to deal with public authorities, they suffer discrimination in bars, restaurants,

and entertainment establishments where they are often required to use male entrances and male toilets and submit to being frisked by men.

Adult transgender people are discriminated against by heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. The result is that many tend to live in their own hermetically sealed world with minimal points of contact with mainstream society.

They are excluded from many religious communities, and are warmly welcomed only by the Afro-Brazilian churches.

## **Culture**

Transgender people have their own street vocabulary, *pajuba*, to denote the terms and conditions most common to their life, such as men, women, sexual organs, good, bad, etc. Much of this terminology has origins in Afro-Brazilian religious culture and is shared by street prostitutes.

Some transgender people communicate in an exclusive language constructed by placing an expression before or after each word they speak. For example, they may converse using "*semi*" after each word. This practice, combined with their specialized vocabulary, renders it impossible for outsiders to understand what they say.

Transgender people who have not undergone sex-change surgery do not consider themselves women. However, they categorize non-transgender men as "he" or "she" according to whether the man assumes an active or passive role in sexual relations. In other words, when transgender people speak of males, gender is considered a question of process; when they speak of females, however, they categorize them as ontologically different, defined by virtue of their vaginas. *Racha* (literally translated as "split") is the *pajuba* term for both a woman and a vagina.

## **Prostitution**

The formal labor market is largely closed to transgender people. An extremely small minority of transvestites have university educations or professional qualifications. With few exceptions, the only professions open to them are nursing, domestic service, hairdressing, gay entertainment, and prostitution. In some cases, even those who work as hairdressers, gay night club artists, and domestic servants also double as sex workers.

In the central, north, and northeastern regions of Brazil, transgender people from extremely poor families sometimes begin working as prostitutes as early as 12 years of age, especially if they have been expelled from home by their families. In the south and southeastern regions and in the major capitals of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, it is common to find transvestites as young as 16 or 17 working the streets.

Transvestites' clients are generally men who appear as "straight" in society. Many, if not most, are married. Contrary to what one might expect, in the majority of instances, the transvestite sex worker performs the active role in sexual intercourse, the male client assuming the passive, receptive role.

AIDS experts believe that a significant hidden route of transmission of AIDS in Brazil is through transgender prostitution: the transvestite passes HIV to the client and the client in turn passes the virus to his wife or partner.

Unlike female sex workers, who have a range of professional options available to them, transgender sex workers often feel they have no options. Many see prostitution as the price they pay for choosing to

transform. Moreover, whereas female sex workers have a wide range of options within the profession--the street, various types of night clubs and brothels, advertising in newspapers and on the Internet--transvestites generally work the streets and low-end brothels, known as "privés."

Their relegation to low-end prostitution has three particularly adverse implications for transvestites: endemic violence, pimping, and trafficking, all of which are aggravated by severely restricted access to good medical services.

### **Violence and Criminality**

Transgender prostitutes working the streets are routinely subject to violence from the police, clients, passers-by, and, sometimes, from pimps. Such violence includes beatings, intimidation, torture, and shootings.

In some cases the violence is random and indiscriminate. Some groups of men consider it fun to beat up transvestites or conduct drive-by shootings. Similarly, some individual clients indulge in sadistic behavior.

In other cases, the violence may take the form of organized or spontaneous punishment or reprisals against transvestites who sometimes rob and assault their clients. Recently, in São Paulo, for example, groups of transvestites surrounded cars that stopped at traffic lights and robbed the drivers. Such acts result in reprisals by individuals and in violent repression by the police. In both cases, the violence targets all transgender people in the region in question and is not limited to criminal elements.

Formal complaints are rarely lodged by transgender people against the police due to a combination of discrimination, police corruption, and fear of reprisals.

Street pimps also sometimes beat up transvestites who fail to pay their obligations.

### **Pimping**

In Brazil, there are two kinds of pimps: male pimps, known as *cafetões*; and transvestite pimps, known as *cafetinas*. *Cafetões* are generally low-level drug dealers. *Cafetinas* run boarding houses for transvestites.

Especially in the major cities, all prostitutes who work the streets are required to pay a pimping fee. This is generally a fixed weekly fee that buys the right to work a particular area where the pimp in question has rights. In return for the fee, the pimp confers protection from harassment from other pimps and, in principle, from the police. Female sex workers pay the fee to *cafetões*. Transvestites pay the fee either to a *cafetão* or to a *cafetina* who has street rights, i.e. one who is respected by the *cafetões*.

Many transvestites live in houses run by *cafetinas*. The *cafetina* charges a daily fee for board and lodging. Where the *cafetina* does not have street rights, the transvestite must also pay a weekly fee to a *cafetão*.

Pimping fees can represent an excessive burden for a transvestite sex worker. In extreme cases, where the transvestite has to pay both a *cafetina* and a *cafetão* in an area where the price of a trick (*programa*) is low, she may have to perform as many as 60 *programas* per month--i.e., two a day, seven days a week--just to cover pimping and transport costs.

Whereas the relationship between the sex worker and the *cafetão* is essentially based on fear and intimidation, the relationship between the sex worker and the *cafetina* is sometimes quite different. In many cases the *cafetina* provides a significant level of guidance and emotional support, especially when the transvestite has moved from a distant region to the major cities of São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro.

In these instances, the *cafetina* functions as a parent figure, especially if, as is often the case, the

transvestite has effectively been expelled from her family, usually at an early age. In these relationships, the *cafetina* is referred to as the *Madrinha* (Godmother) and the transvestite considers herself a *filha* (daughter).

Crucial to whether her transvestites will be guided towards or away from criminal behavior and drug abuse is the character and outlook of the *cafetina*.

### **Trafficking**

Transvestites are often sent by *cafetinas* in the central, north, and northeastern state capitals to their counterparts in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro where they work the streets, take massive doses of hormones, and have their bodies transformed by silicone pumping, breast implants, and other plastic surgery. They are then sent to on to other *cafetinas* based in Europe, principally Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, and Portugal.

The entire process of traveling to and working in Europe is organized by the *cafetinas*. The transvestite typically flies to a country that is not her final destination and then enters the final destination clandestinely. Thereafter, the Brazilian *cafetina*'s European counterpart arranges for accommodation and work, which, depending on the country or region, may be on the street or in a brothel.

If the transvestite is unable to pay for the pumping, plastic surgery, and transport to Europe, she may be financed by the *cafetinas*. Effective interest rates vary, but they are always excessive.

Once the loans have been paid, the transvestite is free and is not tied to a particular *cafetina* structure. The transvestite who manages not to become addicted to narcotics or to be infected by HIV and to steer clear of violence stands a reasonable chance of returning to Brazil with enough money to purchase a house and a car. They frequently also send money to the same parents who rejected them.

### **Silicone Pumping and Plastic Surgery**

Silicone pumping, by which buttocks, legs, and sometimes breasts and faces are transformed, is a staple of many transvestites' lives, especially those who engage in sex work. Some transvestites become specialists, known as *bombardeiras* (pumpers), in pumping industrial silicone into the bodies of other transgender people.

There are a number of adverse effects of silicone pumping, including silicone dropping down into the ankles and feet, the immune system's rejection of silicone, and the risk of silicone entering the bloodstream or vital organs.

Breast implants and facial surgery are generally performed by licensed (and also possibly unlicensed) plastic surgeons who specialize exclusively in attending transgender people.

### **Health and Drug Abuse**

Transgender people's health is precarious not merely because of silicone pumping and massive hormone intake, but also because they often have no private health insurance, and hence are reluctant to see physicians for regular checkups or to treat chronic conditions. The general discrimination and humiliation they experience in dealing with the government bureaucracy often serves to dissuade them from seeking assistance from the public health service.

Moreover, transgender people who work as prostitutes are especially susceptible to drug abuse and sexually

transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV infection.

### **NGOs, Government Agencies, and the Pursuit of Rights**

The deep structural social problems faced by the poor in Brazil, combined with the isolation and discrimination encountered by transgender people, conspire against their attainment of the most basic human and legal rights.

There are a number of NGOs (i.e., non-government organizations) and federal, state, and municipal government agencies that offer various forms of advice and assistance to transgender people, mostly as part of STD/AIDS prevention and assistance programs. These agencies, therefore, tend to focus on condom use and safe-sex measures rather than addressing questions of marginalization, prostitution, violence, and discrimination.

Specific government programs range from general projects aimed at increasing the sensitivity of health workers when dealing with the glbtq community and promoting education about sexual diversity and legal rights to specific programs intended to limit the damage done by silicone pumping. There are also programs that fund NGOs to work with the glbtq community to reduce vulnerability to STD/AIDS.

Many NGOs relied on funding from the U. S. government through USAID's contribution to the Brazilian Government's National AIDS Policy. In 2005, however, USAID funding was withdrawn as a result of the Brazilian Government's refusal to endorse the Bush administration's requirement that AIDS programs emphasize abstinence, faithfulness, the use of condoms only when necessary, and opposition to the decriminalization of prostitution. Brazil was the first country openly to oppose the U. S. abstinence policy, which caused it to lose a grant of \$40,000,000.

### **Transgender Activism and the Gltbq Movement**

Transgender political activism in Brazil only began in the 1990s, as a result of the AIDS epidemic, whereas gay and lesbian mobilization for equal rights dates from the 1970s. Although transgender people frequently add color and excitement to the massive Gay Pride celebrations in Brazil's major cities, they have been less successful than gay men and lesbians in winning a degree of public acceptance and legal rights.

There are relatively few activist groups in Brazil that encompass the whole range of alternative sexualities and genders. Within these mixed groups, transsexuals tend to distinguish themselves from transvestites, hence the increasing use of the term "GLBTT"--Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transvestite, and Transsexual--rather than the acronym most familiar in the United States, "GLBT"--Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender, where "Transgender" is used as an umbrella term.

Despite being included in Brazil's acronym in the struggle for glbtq rights, transgender people receive little outreach from the more mainstream gay and lesbian groups. There are, however, associations of transgender people in several Brazilian states and cities.

One program in Rio de Janeiro focuses on the reintegration of transvestites into society through training and employment opportunities.

### **Emotional Life**

The dire political and social situation of transgender people in Brazil could gradually be alleviated if more transgender people qualified as doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. However, in addition to the discrimination that limits their education, most transvestites seem unwilling to make the sacrifices

necessary to obtain higher education. They seem to believe that to do so would also mean sacrificing the most important years of their lives as beautiful women.

The combined effects of discrimination, humiliation, lack of education, and isolation from mainstream society place enormous emotional strain on Brazil's transgender people, especially those who earn their living as sex workers. They tend to live for the present, in the belief that their beauty will not last long and in the knowledge that prospects for a decent life beyond 30 are extremely limited.

The pressures to succumb to drug abuse and criminality are enormous, but transgender people are also especially vulnerable to contracting AIDS and to falling into cynicism and despair. Avoiding these pitfalls demands remarkable courage and strength of character.

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### **About the Author**

**Barry Michael Wolfe** is an international lawyer and criminologist. He was born in Scotland and educated at Edinburgh, Yale, and Cambridge Universities. He has lived in Brazil since 1986. He is an authority on the investigation of financial crime and money laundering in Brazil, specializing in the profiling of corporate criminal organizations and subcultures. He is currently working on a photographic and literary project entitled "Expressions of a Hidden City," which aims at contributing to the prevention of AIDS and to the alleviation self-destructive attitudes among transvestites by helping them to enhance their self-worth and thereby value their own lives. His project has developed to embrace direct human rights activism on behalf of transgender people. It has attracted the support of pharmaceutical companies, government agencies, NGOs, health professionals, and academics.