

How Brazil's Contradictory Attitudes Foster Violence Toward the LGBT-Community

***By Mitch Rogers,
Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

On February 15, shocking video was captured of the murder of Dandara dos Santos, a male-to-female transgender woman who was tortured and shot on the streets of Fortaleza, a city in the northeastern Brazilian state of Ceará.ⁱ The murder was captured on video and soon went viral. For activists in the Brazilian transgender community this horrific crime cast the spotlight on their plight too late. “The repercussions only came after the video was released. If not, it would have been another crime that would have been ignored,” said transgender woman and *Rede Trans* website coordinator Sayonara Nogueira.ⁱⁱ Crime, violence, and bigotry against the transgender individuals and the LGBT community as a whole remain tragically prevalent, even in spite of Brazil’s ostensibly open culture and significant LGBT policy advancements.

According to *Transgender Europe’s* report on global murders of transgender people between 2008 and 2015, 802 transgender people were murdered in Brazil— a higher number than any other country.ⁱⁱⁱ This staggering statistic dwarfed Mexico, in second place with 229 such murders (the United States came in third with 132). Smaller countries in the Americas reported lower total numbers but much higher *rates* of transgender killings, with Honduras reporting an average of approximately 9.75 transgender murders per million citizens (as compared to rates of 4, 1.872, and .413 per million for Brazil, Mexico, and the United States, respectively). Tragically, because many transgender murders are unpublicized and go unreported, the true number is probably higher. The report does not mention the prevalence of suicide among the transgender population, which further contributes to the community’s high mortality rate.

In Brazil, anti-LGBT violence disproportionately targets male-to-female transgender women. According to *advocate.com*, transgender women make up only 10 percent of the total LGBT population, yet are the victims of 40 percent of all anti-LGBT violence.^{iv} A leading factor in this targeting is visibility. As one transgender woman told *Reuters*, “It’s harder being trans than being gay because if you’re gay you still have a masculine appearance. My appearance is my own creation.”^v

Progress for the Brazilian LGBT Community

The violence against all sectors of Brazil’s LGBT population seems to contradict the country’s reputation for sexual tolerance and openness. For many non-Brazilians, the floats, feathers, and fun of Carnival signify an open and accepting atmosphere. In addition to Carnival celebrations, São Paulo annually hosts the world’s largest gay pride

parade, drawing in millions of people to celebrate the LGBT community. Historically, Brazil has been an early adopter of many progressive LGBT policies. In 1996, Brazil distinguished itself as one of the first countries to provide free HIV medication for its citizens; by working closely with gay activist groups, it became a global example in HIV/AIDS public health initiatives.^{vi} In 2004, the federal government legalized same-sex civil unions, and by 2010, same-sex couples were allowed to adopt children; in 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of full marriage equality for same-sex couples.^{vii} In June 2008, the constitutional clause guaranteeing free medical care for all Brazilians was interpreted to extend to gender reassignment surgeries.

Statistics also show that Brazil seems to be a relatively LGBT-welcoming environment. According to a poll conducted in 2016 by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), Brazil consistently demonstrated high acceptance of homosexual and transgender individuals.^{viii} 86 percent of respondents expressed “no concern” about having a homosexual neighbor, and 75 percent expressed “no concern” about being “unable to determine your neighbor’s gender at first sight” (for reference, the United States polled 79 percent and 71 percent, respectively). 48 percent of participating Brazilians know a transgender person, the highest percentage in Latin America.^{ix}

Brazil's LGBT Activist Groups

For many Brazilians, the disturbing video of Dandara's torture was the necessary wake-up call to bring anti-LGBT violence to their attention. Many activist groups in Brazil, however, have long been monitoring the persecution and advocating for change. The organization *Rede Trans* was founded in 2009 and actively monitors threats and violence in the transgender and transvestite community.^x The organization also monitors transgender suicides, bringing important awareness to the mental health repercussions of transgender persecution. Other transgender activist groups also participate in tracking aggression against the LGBT community, including the website *Tem Local*.

Founded in Salvador, Bahia, in 1980, the non-profit organization *Grupo Gay da Bahia* (GGB) is one of the leading forces promoting LGBT rights in Brazil. The GGB's three core objectives are to defend the interests and rights of the LGBT community; disseminate correct information about homosexuality, homophobia, and HIV/AIDS; and call fellow members of the LGBT community to action.^{xi} The organization holds two meetings every week to plan, organize, and enact programs to promote the tolerance, awareness, and health of the LGBT community.

The Influence of Evangelicalism

But while Brazil might seem unabashedly progressive in LGBT attitudes, a strong homo- and transphobic culture still pervades the country. Part of this violent culture has origins in Brazilian religious life. Up to a quarter of Brazilians are evangelical and attend “American-style Pentecostal” churches which preach against any lifestyle beyond conservative heteronormativity.^{xii} The surging growth of evangelicalism in the predominantly Catholic nation began in the 1980s, and has deeply affected Brazilian culture.^{xiii} As political scientist Omar Encarnacion has said about the Latin American region, “If you look at religion as a variable, what you find is that the more Catholic the country, the more likely they are to be accepting of homosexuality and vice versa. The more Protestant they are, the less likely they are [to be] accepting, and the less likely they are to have an active gay rights legislation.”^{xiv}

The phrase “there is a church on every corner” is often used to describe the ubiquity of evangelical culture, in which praise, sermons, and songs ring out everywhere— from the pop-up churches in houses and garages all the way up to enormous megachurches and packed athletic stadiums. While most evangelical doctrines do not advocate the persecution of LGBT individuals, their fierce defense of “traditional” family and sexual values may give a sense of impunity for those committing violent acts. In ILGA’s 2016 poll, 37 percent of Brazilian respondents reported that “there is a conflict between same-sex desire and [their] religious beliefs.”^{xv}

Unfortunately, radical religiosity (both evangelical and otherwise) has been used to justify violence against the LGBT community. According to one devout Christian, “Don’t associate with *travecos* [a derogatory term for transgender and transvestite individuals]. They carry an evil spirit with them.”^{xvi} In September 2014 in Betim, Minas Gerais, a 19-year-old gay man was abducted at knifepoint.^{xvii} While two of the attackers beat and choked him, the third attacker prayed over the young man, asking God for forgiveness of the man’s sins. The attackers burned his hair and eyebrows and, as the man was losing consciousness, wrapped a cloth around his arm and lit it on fire. The attackers abandoned the man on the sidewalk with a note in his pocket that read, “This [man] was only the first of the city to pass through the purification.” The note continued on to say that they were going to conduct a “cleansing” of the city, “bringing the fire of purification” to anyone who declared their “bestial ‘love.’”

Political Players

The ramifications of evangelical culture have also reverberated in the political sphere. Coinciding with the recent conservative movement (as exemplified by last year’s impeachment of left-leaning President Dilma Rousseff), a number of evangelicals have won congressional seats and gained greater influence in Brasília. Since 2010, evangelicals have doubled their seats in the lower house of Congress, representing more than 60 of the 513 members.^{xviii} This group— often rallying themselves within the “Bull, Bible, and Bullet” Caucus of Congress— has frequently opposed progressive LGBT legislation. Jean Wyllys, a prominent, openly gay member of Congress, has said that “Evangelicals are getting increasingly powerful and have taken over Congress.”^{xix}

Former president of the lower house, conservative radio host, and evangelical Eduardo Cunha, before being forced out of Congress because of bribery allegations, has been outspoken in his opposition to policies favoring LGBT rights, even going so far as to propose a Heterosexual Pride Day to Congress.^{xx} Cunha is known for using his connections with the evangelical community to advance his political and personal goals, pandering to various congregations to garner votes and using churches as intermediaries to receive bribes.^{xxi}

Not all opposition to LGBT legislation comes from the evangelical bloc, however. Influential, vocal conservatives have also come to power without any strong affiliation to religion. Elected into Congress in 1990, far-right congressman Jair Bolsonaro has promulgated bigoted rhetoric against the LGBT community, women, and liberals. Lawyer and activist Maria da Silva, herself a transgender woman, said of Bolsonaro's popularity that "It is a part of the Brazilian population that was hidden, that was in the closet, and now it has a leader, it has a discourse to legitimize it."^{xxii} Bolsonaro has regularly made egregious statements during his time in office, such as telling a female politician that she did not "merit" (*você não merece*) being raped by him.^{xxiii} Bolsonaro, a 2018 presidential hopeful carrying significant political and electoral clout, has frequently opposed LGBT rights, including advocating beating homosexual children in the hopes of making them heterosexual.^{xxiv}

Internationally-renowned researcher and activist Sonia Correa believes that the "conservative restoration" in Brazil has opened the gates for this resurgence of LGBT violence.^{xxv} According to Correa, "Actors who have always vociferated against homosexuality now feel more at ease to act and speak."^{xxvi} Political scientist Javier Corrales told the *New York Times* that "Brazilians are becoming more tolerant, but the counter trend is that those who remain intolerant and opposed to LGBT rights are developing new strategies and a more virulent discourse to block progress on those issues."^{xxvii}

The culture of impunity toward LGBT violence has allegedly reached the police and courts, as anti-LGBT attackers are often investigated and prosecuted with leniency.^{xxviii} According to a 2015 report published by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 67 percent of the perpetrators of LGBT murders were not arrested in 2013.^{xxix} Police often refuse to label anti-LGBT violence as homophobic hate crime, and have faced accusations of abuse against LGBT individuals. In April 2015, transgender woman Veronica Bolina was arrested in São Paulo for assaulting a neighbor.^{xxx} While in custody, she entered into an altercation with the guards, which eventually led to her being stripped, handcuffed on her wrists and ankles, and beaten. Pictures of her bloody, swollen face circulated the internet, causing indignation from activists who created the hashtag *#SomosTodasVeronica* ("We are all Veronica").

Moving Forward

It is easy to paint all conservatives and evangelicals with the same brush. While it is possible—probable, even—that the conservative and evangelical movements have created environments where trans- and homophobic violence is tolerated instead of quashed, many evangelicals still seek to promote compassionate Christian values. For

them, fervent religion is not a platform from which to air out their prejudices; it is the needed remedy to a long list of mental, physical, and spiritual ailments. Deep reforms within the evangelical community are necessary, but for the sake of those LGBT individuals being persecuted, evangelicals must become allies, not enemies. For a true reformation of Brazil's anti-LGBT culture, secular and religious forces must work together; perpetuating the ideological battle between the two sides will only increase the division within the country, leaving in its wake hundreds– even thousands– of LGBT casualties.

Although Brazil is currently at a short-term nadir in terms of LGBT acceptance, its history still provides hope for the future. For example, the increased awareness that groups such as *Rede Trans*, *Tem Local*, *Grupo Gay da Bahia*, and others give to the pandemic anti-LGBT violence in Brazil will hopefully inspire a renewed push for cultural and political changes. In spite of the setbacks, challenges, and opposition against progressive policies, Brazil has made– and can again make– significant strides forward for LGBT rights.

By Mitch Rogers, Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs

Additional editorial support provided by Sean Burges, Senior Research Fellow at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, Emma Tyrou, Extramural Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, and Alex Rawley and Taylor Lewis, Research Associates at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs.

ⁱ Jacobs, Andrew. “Brazil is Facing an Epidemic of Anti-LGBT Violence.” *New York Times*, July 5, 2016. See also “Travesti é espancada até a morte no Bom Jardim.” *O Povo*, March 3, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ “2,016 reported deaths of trans and gender diverse persons murdered between January 2008 and December 2015.” *Transgender Europe* report, March 31, 2016. http://transrespect.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/TvT_TMM_TDoV2016_Tables_EN.pdf

^{iv} Thapa, Saurav Jung. “We Need to Talk About Anti-LGBT Violence in Brazil.” *advocate.com*, July 12, 2016. <http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2016/7/12/we-need-talk-about-anti-lgbt-violence-brazil>

^v Doce, Nacho. “Brazilian squatters offer shelter from anti-gay violence.” *Reuters*, December 8, 2016.

^{vi} Jacobs, “Brazil is Facing an Epidemic of Anti-LGBT Violence.”; see also “History of HIV/AIDS in Brazil.” *Brown University Library*, <https://library.brown.edu/create/fivecenturiesofchange/chapters/chapter-8/aids/history-of-hiv-aids-in-brazil/>.

How Brazil's Contradictory Attitudes Foster Violence Toward the LGBT-Community

vii Carroll, Aengus. *State-Sponsored Homophobia*. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association report, May 2016, updated October 2016, p. 50.

http://ilga.org/downloads/02_ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2016_ENG_WEB_150516.pdf

viii *The Personal and the Political: Attitudes to LGBTI People Around the World*. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association report, October 2016, p. 41-58.

http://ilga.org/downloads/Ilga_Riwi_Attitudes_LGBTI_survey_Logo_personal_political.pdf

ix Ibid.

x *Rede Trans*, <http://redetransbrasil.org/index.html>.

xi *Grupo Gay da Bahia*, <https://grupogaydabahia.com.br/>.

xii Jacobs, "Brazil is Facing an Epidemic of Anti-LGBT Violence."

xiii Riding, Alan. "In Brazil, Evangelicals Are on Rise." *New York Times*, October 25, 1987.

xiv Brocchetto, Marilia. "Gay in Latin America: Legal but Deadly." *CNN*, March 3, 2017.

xv *The Personal and the Political: Attitudes to LGBTI People Around the World*. p. 48.

xvi This quote was sent to the author by a colleague who had been living and working in Brazil at the time.

xvii Resende, Dayse, Bruna Carmona, and Luciene Câmara. "Polícia investiga motivação religiosa em agressão a gay." *O Tempo*, September 26, 2014.

xviii Jacobs, "Brazil is Facing an Epidemic of Anti-LGBT Violence."

xix Ibid.

xx Ibid.

xxi Castro, Juliana, Leticia Fernandes, and Marcelo Remigio. "Para enfrentar denúncia, Cunha se ampara em grupo construído entre evangélicos." *O Globo*, August 23, 2015.

xxii Phillips, Dom. "Torture and Killing of Transgender Woman Stun Brazil." *New York Times*, March 8, 2017.

xxiii Romero, Simon. "Conservative's Star Rises in Brazil as Polarizing Views Tap Into Discontent." *New York Times*, May 7, 2016; see also McLoughlin, Beth. "Brazil's Trump?" *US News and World Report*, January 19, 2017.

xxiv Jacobs, "Brazil is Facing an Epidemic of Anti-LGBT Violence."; see also Kwong, Matt. "'They kill with so much hate': Anti-LGBT violence soars in Brazil." *CBC News*, August 18, 2015.

xxv Kwong, "'They kill with so much hate': Anti-LGBT violence soars in Brazil."

xxvi Ibid.

xxvii Jacobs, "Brazil is Facing an Epidemic of Anti-LGBT Violence."

xxviii Ibid.

xxix *Violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Persons in the Americas*. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, November 12, 2015, p. 246.

<http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/violenceigbtipersons.pdf>

How Brazil's Contradictory Attitudes Foster Violence Toward the LGBT-Community

^{xxx} Darlington, Shasta. "Brazilian transgender woman accuses police of brutal beating." *CNN*, April 22, 2015.