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Travails of the Travestis

The body was found on [November 10 wrapped in plastic and tied to a log](#) in a stream off the side of BR-364. This busy highway connects Rio Branco, the westernmost state capital of Brazil, to the rest of the country. When authorities unwrapped the body, they discovered that four fingers of the right hand had been severed close to the joints. The victim had been killed by a shot in the abdomen.

One day later authorities identified the corpse of the 16-year-old male as Adriana. Adriana was a travesti—a Brazilian transgendered woman—who worked as a prostitute along the highway.

The Brazilian word travesti comes from the word transvestite, which is defined as a person who assumes the dress and manner of the opposite sex. This term, however, is now considered outdated and derogatory.

“There’s much more the chance or danger of being killed for a transgender woman, it’s much more than for gays and lesbians,” said Luiz Mott. Mott leads Grupo Gay de Bahia (Gay Group of Bahia), which tracks all reported murders of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Brazil. “Transvestites are much more fragile than gays,” he said. Adriana is just one of the 113 transgender women brutally murdered in the country between November 20, 2013 and November 20, 2014.

Mott founded GGB to put a face and a name to each murder and to combat homophobia and violence, which he says is widespread in the North of Brazil where Rio Branco is located. Transgender people self-identify and live their lives as the opposite sex. Some undergo gender reassignment surgery. Others choose not to undergo the complicated operation. In Brazil those people are known as travestis. The majority of them were born with male genitalia but live their lives as women.

The Brazilian public has long accepted transgender people in the streets and in the media. In the 80s Roberta Close’s high cheekbones, and full cheeks became a standard of beauty for all Brazilian women. But this cultural acceptance of transgender people belies one fact—Brazil is one of the most dangerous places in the world for transgender people.

In 2013 there were 108 reported transgender murders. In 2012 there were 128. And in 2011 there were 98. The majority of these victims were travesti women.

“There isn’t one murder that is more important than others because they are all important,” said Keila Simpson, a travesti who once worked as a prostitute in Salvador. Now an activist for travesti causes, Simpson said, “whether you die in a relaxed way or whether you are stabbed 40, 50 times or shot, death is death and death takes a person away.”

Simpson also says that prostitution one of the few employment options open to travestis in places like Salvador and Rio de Janeiro.

In the heart of Rio de Janeiro, Lapa is one of Rio's most bohemian neighborhoods. People flock to its bars and streets Friday and Saturday for music and dancing. On the side streets travestis like 20 year-old Felicia Frisão solicit customers. She's been working as a prostitute since she was 16 and she says that prostitution was her only option.

"If anyone says that then they are lying. You every hour go with a different man, running risk of getting sick. It's very humiliating," Frisão said. There are more than 300 brothels, bars, and other establishments that offer sex for sale in Rio de Janeiro, however, most travestis ply their trade on the streets. Frisão said that if she had the choice she would open up a clothing store.

"For the travestis it's not a choice, it's almost as if it was a destiny. If you are a travesti, that is what you are going to do. That is the only thing you can do because no one is going to hire you for anything," said Thaddeus Blanchette, an anthropology professor who has been studying race and gender in Brazil for 15 years. Blanchette said that the general attitude in Brazil toward travestis can be summed up in simple terms.

“ ‘Go out and sell yourself. But then if you get killed don't come running to me. Don't complain because that's your destiny, ’ ” he said.

Three days after her body was found, Adriana was buried by the Archdiocese of Rio Branco in a cemetery. Father Máximo Lombardi officiated at the services. He ended the funeral with one last statement.

"Lord Jesus, this barbaric death is not in vain. Amen," he said. As of December 13, Brazilian authorities have not charged or arrested anyone for Adriana's murder.