

Issues Concerning the Informality and Outdoor Sex Work Performed by Travestis in São Paulo, Brazil

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Abstract The objective of this article was to discuss a series of issues pertaining to outdoor sex work practiced by low-income *travestis* in São Paulo, Brazil. Qualitative methods conducted among this segment of the population revealed sex work as almost inseparable from the existence of *travestis* as a social group. Among them, the outdoor modality was the most prominent and social stigma was a predisposing factor for their entrance (and permanence) in sex work. The results showed that some of the difficulties they faced regarding work must be understood as a consequence of them being self-employed, informal workers occupying public spaces, much like street vendors. The points they shared in common with Brazilian street vendors included the struggle for street space, their rejection by local residents and shopkeepers, police persecution, and higher credit and rental expenses. All this led to mutual exploitation within the group, difficulties in changing occupations, predatory competition for customers, and difficulties in forming professional associations.

Keywords Travestis · Transgenders · Sex work · Informal work

Introduction

Travestis form a group that has been attracting the growing attention of researchers from Brazil and around the world. Part of this interest is due to the group's transgender characteristics that give rise to studies that research their gender and body construction, as well as their sexuality. Themes related to their work and economic conditions are dealt with less frequently, although some studies have dedicated a considerable amount of attention to these topics, like Kulick (1998) and Benedetti (2005). These studies showed a strong correlation between *travesti* identity and sex work, which is the focus of this article based on data obtained from field research conducted in the city of São Paulo.

Travestis' history also shows how sex work ended up occupying a central place in their life. Up until the 1960s, the term "travesti" in Brazil was reserved for individuals who dressed as women in Carnival parodies, in shows or even in their day-to-day lives. There was no connotation of sex work as shown by Green (2001). In the 1960s the term started to be used to refer mainly to *transformistas* (female impersonators) who performed in shows that proliferated throughout the country. With their glamour, feminine seduction, sculptural bodies, and carefully made up faces they embodied, and at times exaggerated, the stereotypes associated to the gender they adopted. Their acceptance was conditioned to the presence of appropriate gender brands (Green, 2001). In the early 1960s, according to another study (Perlongher, 1987), there were few *travestis* in São Paulo. They restricted themselves to theaters and nightclubs and kept a low profile. Although there was continuity with areas occupied by women sex workers, the two groups never interacted. In the 1970s, the term *travesti* started to be used to designate a large number of individuals who began occupying determined areas in large cities to practice sex work. They used women's clothes, long hair, painted nails,

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and shaved parts of the body. They also resorted to hormones and silicone to make their bodies appear as feminine as possible. Trevisan (1997) considered the early 1970s as the key moment to the appearance of travestis as sex workers in almost all large Brazilian cities.

It is important to remember that from the 1970s, when *travestis* emerged as a distinct social group, to the present day, sex work as a form of self employment is not considered illegal in Brazil. According to Brazilian law, only the exploitation of sex work under various pimping forms is illegal. On the other hand, as far as sex work is not a legally regulated profession in Brazil, travestis can be considered as part of a larger class of workers, those who work in the informal economy. According to the “Resolution concerning decent work and the informal economy,” of the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2002), “the term ‘informal economy’ refers to all economic activities by workers and economic units that are—in law or in practice—not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements” (p. 53).

Since the pimping that is typical in female sex work is practically non-existent among travestis in Brazil, they can also be considered self-employed workers. If we follow the distinction proposed by Murphy and Venkatesh (2006) between indoor and outdoor sex workers, the latter being those that who “exchange sexual intercourse (including oral sex) for money or some other material good” and “conduct their work on the street” (p. 129), almost all travestis in Brazil can be considered outdoor sex workers. As self-employed informal workers who occupy public spaces and approach their clients on the streets, parks, and avenues, the *travestis* bear similarities with other professional categories that share the same labor characteristics, like street vendors. Therefore, exploring the aspects that these segments have in common is a relevant endeavor for it allows us to see that a significant number of *travesti* traits do not necessarily originate in gender, or even sex work-related determinants, but in the manner in which their insertion in the professional market takes place. Later in this article, some of the similarities will be explored.¹

The idea for a specific study on the difficulties faced by *travestis* in sex work emerged after reflecting on an observation made by Vanwesenbeeck (2001), for whom literature on sex work “is still much more about sex than it is about work” (p. 242). Given that *travesti* identity construction is strongly linked to sex work and not just to their transgender condition, we agree with the need to equilibrate this “balance.” Their sex work is obviously linked to this condition, but it also extrapolates it, which is why a specific study on this theme is important.

Method

Participants

This article is part of a larger survey aimed at achieving an understanding of the identity of low-income *travestis*.² It emerged from a health promotion project among this segment of the population and was structured on weekly meetings with *travestis* who gathered at a health center in downtown São Paulo. These meetings were attended by an average of 15–20 persons. Over the 4 years that this survey lasted, around 200 travestis took part in the group.

Initially, the main discussion themes centered on the STD/AIDS prevention, but over time, the topics discussed grew to include body care, work, competition among *travestis*, police and customer violence, prejudice, housing difficulties, and drug abuse, etc.

In terms of geographic origin and age, the *travestis* at these meetings formed a diversified group, but in terms of social class, low-income *travestis*—those who were poorly paid for their work, almost always as sex workers—predominated.³ The geographic location of the health center in a rundown area of the city helped, and the word-of-mouth providing notice of it explained, at least in part, the predominance of poor *travestis* at these meetings.

In terms of ethnicity, the correlation of (lower) social class and (darker) skin color was also borne out among this group. The majority of them had common ethnic mixtures of indigenous or African origin, in line with Parker’s (1999) observation that the “structure of class and color is reproduced in transvestite prostitution: sex workers tend to be, in general, both poorer and darker skinned than are their clients” (p. 255).

The educational level of travestis in the research was considerably low. Most of them had only few years of education, which is related to their class origin and the homophobia they faced in school. Although the travestis in this research were poor, which is related to their lower educational levels, this characteristic seems to be common among travestis in Brazil in general. Grandi, Goihman, Ueda, and Rutherford (2000) showed that 84% of the travestis in their research spent 8 years or less in schools.

The possibility of giving travestis unencumbered access was one of the main concerns of the health promotion project. Since acceptance of their transgender condition was one of the requisites, they were not asked to provide their birth names. By the same token, the travestis were not identified as “patients” of the health institute, for this would require them to register and present identification papers. The possibility of coming and

¹ The metropolitan region of São Paulo, with a population of approximately 20 million, has close to 163,000 street vendors (IBGE, 2008). This is more than 10% of the region’s self-employed workers.

² Some themes in the survey can be consulted in other papers (Garcia 2008a, b, 2009a, b).

³ This means that the *travestis* not only came from poor families, which is common in Brazil, and, as one of us discuss in another paper (Garcia, 2009a), but that they also remained poor for reasons to be explored further on in this article.

going to the meetings without going through a formal registration process also allowed for the participation of travestis concerned with being identified, especially if they were sought by authorities for some crime they may have committed.

Procedure

Ethnography was the data collection methodology used, along with a field diary containing the most relevant information obtained at the meetings. The systematic registration of the meetings was done at the end of the encounters, always prioritizing the description of the most relevant elements. Most of these described model situations that were experienced or, in other words, stories that repeated themselves frequently among the travestis researched. In some cases, they dealt with less common situations that nevertheless were important enough to underscore in order to avoid excessive generalizations frequently done regarding the universe of travestis.

Measures

The data were submitted to a qualitative analysis starting with the content category analysis proposed by Bardin (2004). This technique is characterized by the classification of the elements to be analyzed through a thematic differentiation and a subsequent regrouping through the analogy established among them. This categorization allowed for the condensation of raw data in simpler representations, which permitted the establishment and interpretation of inferences. It is all linked to the idea of achieving greater data visibility, facilitating the work of relating them to the theoretical reference. This process involved four moments:

- (1) *Pre-analysis*: Firstly, the recordings of the meetings were organized. Then came a “fluctuating reading” of the material (when some hypothesis and leading questions emerged. These will be exposed later on in this text). Themes and sub-themes that repeated themselves with greater frequency were selected from this reading. This article deals with one of the themes selected: work.
- (2) *Exploration of the materials*: The units chosen from the register were the conversations that took place in the meetings and recorded. These were separated according to the themes they dealt with.
- (3) *Classification of the units registered*: This was done according to the grouping of the common elements in excluding categories. Some of these categories came from sub-themes observed during pre-analysis, and others emerged during the treatment of results.
- (4) During the interpretation of results, a major similarity was observed among the sub-themes that emerged in surveys conducted with sex workers and in research with Brazilian itinerant workers. This led us to propose a

discussion of the matter, parallel with the conclusions of the studies pertaining to this professional category.

Results and Discussion

Indoor and Outdoor Sex Work

The prevailing modality among the researched travestis was outdoor sex work.⁴ This involved the occupation of public spaces, such as streets, avenues, and squares where they exhibited themselves, offering sexual services to customers walking or driving up to them. Intercourse could take place in a public, yet secluded area, inside the customer’s car, or in a hotel.

Some *travestis* who participated in the encounters⁵ would also go to movie theaters to meet potential clients. Most of those who worked inside these movie theaters did so as an alternative to working the streets. But some would remain inside for long periods of time seeking clients and normally conducting their business in the bathrooms or in the back rows. Terto (1989), Parker (1999), and Vale (2000) considered big city porno cinemas important homosexual socializing areas, especially when it comes to seeking sex partners who are usually anonymous. The *travestis* interviewed justified conducting their sex work inside movie houses saying these areas provided more protection against violence.⁶ However, they also pointed out some significant disadvantages. They said that sex services provided inside the cinemas were shorter and cheaper, with a greater customer turnover when compared to outdoor sex work. Another disadvantage of working in these

⁴ According to studies that compare “indoor” and “outdoor” sex-work, the latter is more dangerous than the former, because its greater visibility leads to greater verbal, physical, and sexual violence by police, clients, boyfriends, and passersby (Dalla, 2000; Maher, 1996; Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006; Scott et al., 2005; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). Murphy and Venkatesh (2006) also underscored the greater propensity for the use of drugs, a more negative self-esteem, and shorter-lived careers in outdoor sex work, while Vanwesenbeeck (2001) highlighted the diminished use of condoms in the segment.

⁵ We estimate that they are less than 10 percent of the total number of travestis.

⁶ Some *travestis* in the group refused vehemently to work inside cinemas, saying they felt ill at ease working in “closed-in areas.” They often referred to the streets as a space of freedom. These observations can be related to the study conducted by Freitas (1985) with female sex workers in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. He felt there were important traits that differentiated outdoor sex from indoor sex work, given that in the latter there is a physical frontier between “inside” and “outside,” that segregated sex workers, creating in them a feeling of exclusion. Since there is no defined physical frontier on the streets, there is no immediate spatial segregation. Other characters, other than clients, circulate in these areas, which leads to other kinds of interaction and reduces the feelings of exclusion mentioned. We consider this to be a viable interpretation to explain the refusal of many *travestis* interviewed to work in cinemas.

cinemas, which many *travestis* mentioned, was the daily fee the movie houses charged them, meaning they had to work much harder in order to make a profit. But the greater safety provided by the movie houses induced many of them to conduct their business in periods when it was more dangerous to work on the streets.

The Sex Market Recourse

The data showed that the generalized homophobia in Brazilian society is one of the determining factors, explaining the increase in the likelihood of sex work as the only option for *travestis*.⁷ It was present in the family, making it difficult for the effeminate youth/*travesti*, who was unemployed, to turn to his parents or relatives for help. Homophobia in schools led to absenteeism and early drop-out, putting professions that require higher education levels out of reach. Its presence in these individuals' hometowns led to their precocious migration to the "big city." In the job market, homophobia denied them access to some low-paying occupations. Because the sex market values them for their youth, it wasn't difficult for effeminate youths/future *travestis* to attract their first customers in the big city, and initiate themselves in the world of sex work.

The results showed that social stigma suffered by *travestis* was a predisposing factor for their entrance in the world of sex work.⁸ Once fully involved in this work, the relationship between the stigmatization of *travestis* and option for sex work appeared to follow the so-called "vicious circle" cycle: the more they were stigmatized the less chances they had to follow other professional careers, leading many of them to the practice of sex work. This, in turn, increased the stigma vis-a-vis the group because of the stigma associated to this line of work.

While the economic motivation for sex work was an important one for the researched *travestis*, it was not the only one. Among them, the pleasure associated with this activity was emphasized both in terms of sexual pleasure and of the recognition of *travestis* as sexually desirable individuals, a result in line with those obtained by Kulick (1998) and Benedetti (2005). The desire customers felt for them, especially those who insisted in having an "active" role in the sexual relationship,⁹ was described as being extremely pleasurable. This helps to explain why so many homosexual youths enter the sexual

market in Brazil: if many were already enjoying an intense sexual life, why not use sex as a means to earn money? This also helps one understand why *travestis* could eventually turn to sexual commerce, even when there was no economic need to do so, which was something that occurred with some *travestis* studied here.¹⁰

R. [one of the very few *travestis* in the group that did not practice sex work on a regular basis and who owned a beauty salon, purchased after living in Europe for a few years] said that going out on the streets, even if she no longer needed the money, was an "addiction." She said she loved watching the cars stop and honk their horns at her. She thought it was all "really great."

A third reason that explained the option for the sex market by the *travestis* researched was the fact that the substantial number of *travestis* earning their living on the streets as sex workers served as a "magnet," attracting other young, effeminate homosexuals. This occurred because they were plausible role models for those wanting a clearer identification with the feminine gender. According to Weeks (1996), the emergence of an identity contrary to the heterosexual norms of our culture presupposes "the possibility of some sort of social space, and social support or network which gives meaning to individual needs" (p. 385). This could lead to the "full acceptance of one's feelings and way of life, such as through involvement in a supportive subculture of similarly inclined people" (p. 387). Life stories recounted many times at the meetings described, with a richness of detail, how the entry to sex work placed these young homosexuals in closer contact with "veteran" *travestis*. It was their port of entry to a new universe:

V. remembered very well when she arrived [at the capital of a Northeastern state]. With a look of shock on her face she recalled: "When I saw those *bichas* [faggots] and their big asses and tits, I told myself: this is what I want to be."

Perhaps the only socializing areas available to the low-income transgenders studied by us were the big city regions where sexual commerce takes place. It was there where they learned how to transform their bodies with hormones and/or silicone and learned concepts of aesthetic care. It was in these areas where they established friendships, learned the tricks of

⁷ This was consistent with Perlongher (1987), Kulick (1998), Ferreira (2003), and Benedetti (2005).

⁸ This was in concordance with studies on transgenders conducted in other parts of the world, like those among transgender women of color of San Francisco (Sausa, Keatley, & Operario, 2007), *hijras* in South India (Reddy, 2005) or *katoeys* in Thailand (Jenkins, Ayutthaya, & Hunter, 2005). The trajectory of San Francisco's transgender women of color studied by Sausa et al. (2007) is very similar to that of Brazilian *travestis* in terms of the discrimination and stigmatization that generates precarious education, separation from the family, unemployment, housing difficulties, indebtedness, etc.

⁹ The customer considered "active" is the one that played the male role in the sexual relation. This included the anal penetration of the *travesti*, who also fellated and masturbated the customer.

¹⁰ Some researchers have also observed this component in other transgender modalities. One case in point is the study conducted by Clements et al. (1999) with MTF transgenders in San Francisco. In a recent study, Weinberg and Williams (2010) observe that "those transwomen who could produce the most successful femininity occupied the highest tier of desirability in the competition for MSTW (men sexually interested in transwomen)" (p. 377).

the trade, learned where to find health services, where there was less discrimination, where to find associations to help them pay their rent, etc. Sausa et al.'s (2007) study with transgender women of color of San Francisco similarly cited sexual commerce as a kind of "rite of passage" where there was a search for a social support structure to replace the family of origin.¹¹ In this sense, we can apply to the *travestis* studied here, their affirmation that "sex work can be conceptualized both as a forced consequence of the structural barriers facing [them], but also as an informed choice for survival given the barriers these women experience" (Sausa et al., 2007, p. 773).

Sex Work and Its Difficulties

The results showed five major sectors where we could observe *travestis*' difficulties related to sex work. As noted earlier, major similarities were observed between their difficulties and the ones described in surveys conducted with Brazilian street vendors, which will be detailed in each one of the sections described here.

Competition for Public Spaces

Having a good "point" for finding clients used to be considered of fundamental importance by them. Defending it against "invasions" by other *travestis* was also a constant necessity. The older ones, and those who worked in the area the longest, demanded the right to occupy the best "points." The only episode of physical aggression witnessed during the group occurred exactly for this reason:

A violent fight took place today. At one point, D turned to T, who was on the other side of the room, and started shouting that she had already told her that she could not walk down the same side of the street that she (D) was on. She got up and quickly lunged herself at T, who was next to me, took off her shoe and, with the heel, hit her on the forehead. (...). During the next discussion, D was still very upset, saying that she "knew that she was going to get her" in the group. The other *travestis* said that she was wrong in attacking her there, but they seemed to think that the attack in itself was justified.

The necessity for a good "meeting point" also led them to the rental of these spots. Older *travestis* charged the younger, recent arrivals and/or those who recently entered the sex market some kind of a fee. Apparently, the charging of the fee was a

way the younger *travestis*, who attracted more customers, could compensate the older ones for a possible drop in their income, which would cause them financial difficulties.¹² Although payment of daily and/or protection fees took place in this kind of scenario, the practice was never referred to as one that sustained itself for long periods of time. The younger ones soon rebelled against the fees by moving to another point for sex work or by challenging the older ones. For this, they relied on the protection ensured by the new social ties they established with other *travestis* or the protection provided by a *cafetina* [madam].

The *cafetina*—the older *travesti* who owns a boarding house for *travestis*—differed from the *cafetão* (pimp) typical of female sex work in Brazil, since she provided a relationship of dwelling rather than of protection. The relationship with the *cafetina* (madam) was one the studied *travesti* generally opted for, unlike the imposed relationship that exists between *cafetão* and female sex workers. However, the kind of domination on female sex workers exerted by a *cafetão* also occasionally appeared among the *travestis* studied, sparking violent reactions:

Just three *travestis* came to the group today. They were frightened with some of the fights that were taking place in the region [...]. According to what they said, C. [a *travesti* who used to be very active in the group, but whose presence had become rare] returned from [a capital city in northeastern Brazil] with her brother and five other *travestis*. They settled in the region and C's brother started pimping them. L. and D. [two older *travestis* who are very active in the group] did not like the situation and threatened C. A fight broke out and D stabbed C. C's brother went after D and shot her, wounding her in the groin. Regarding the conflicts that took place the week before last, P said that D was better but that she decided to spend "some time in her home town until the dust settled." Pressured by L and other *travestis*, C and her brother agreed that the novices should work in another region. In the Group, M. said "those *bichas* [faggots] will soon cause problems" because they would not put up with being pimped for a long time.

In some studies of Brazilian street vendors, the use of the street and the lack of a private space that helps define the profession being exercised generate competition among street vendors for the use of public spaces, giving rise to a dispute for the best "points of sale." Strategies associated with this dispute, as the selling and renting of "points of sale," are common in this group (Mafra, 2007; Ramires, 2002), in a similar way as it occurs with *travestis*.

¹¹ The need to find a group of like people where one's condition is accepted has also been noted in studies that focus on other sex worker modalities, like the study conducted by Davies and Feldman (1999) with male sex workers of London and Cardiff and by Murphy and Venkatesh (2006) with women sex workers in New York.

¹² The rivalry between young and older *travesti* is also commented on by Ferreira (2003).

Complaints by Store Owners and Residents

According to the surveyed *travestis*, the most common complaint that residents and store owners had of *travestis* had to do with the fact that many times they would walk around semi-naked and/or with their genitals exposed. For the *travestis*, this ostentatious exhibition of nudity was necessary in order to attract clients. If the exhibition of breasts and buttocks was a commonplace occurrence,¹³ the exhibition of the penis was mainly to satisfy their demand to “check out” its size, something which is highly esteemed in Brazil’s homoerotic universe. The incompatibility between the demands of clients and the community often led residents and store owners to demand police action or take matters into their own hands to combat sex work. For instance, they would write down the license plate numbers of the cars owned by the *travestis*’ customers as a way to pressure them to stop frequenting the area.¹⁴

Atentado ao pudor [indecent exposure]¹⁵ was the principal charge against the *travestis* surveyed who had been arrested. In most cases, however, they were only detained for a brief period, spending the night in a police station and being released the following morning. This was such a common practice that they referred to it as “sleeping in the police station.” The high risk of arrest for those involved in outdoor sex work is also highlighted in the international literature on sex work (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001).

Research regarding street vendors in Brazil show, in a similar way as it occurs with *travestis*, that store owners who resent the use of public spaces accuse street vendors of undermining their businesses with lower prices, and residents complained of the trash strewn on the streets. The pressure exerted by these groups often led police to “cleanse” the area and expel the street vendors (Mafra, 2007; Ramires, 2002).

¹³ The decorum exhibited by the *travestis*, when gathered together, was substantially different from that shown by most Brazilians. For example, it was common for them to display to each other their breasts or buttocks. This caused some problems with the institution where the group met, since at times they did this in rooms they shared with the institutions’ patients, who complained about their behavior.

¹⁴ Something similar was observed by Trevisan (2000). In some parts of the city of São Paulo, residents, with the backing of the local government, would resort to measures that would make it difficult for cars to pass through streets normally occupied by *travestis* and female sex workers. For example, they would change the direction of streets or set up barriers to impede the circulation of cars. The persecution of *travestis*’ clients in Brazil and police shakedowns are similar to those described in international literature on sex work (Scott et al., 2005).

¹⁵ For *travestis*, *atentado ao pudor* (indecent exposure) refers to any act considered obscene, like excessive nudity. However, Article 233 of Brazil’s Penal Code makes specific mention of *ato obsceno* (obscene act), which differ from *atentado violento ao pudor* (indecent assault)—Article 214—that refers to acts that involve violence or serious, sexually motivated threats against someone (except rape).

Another similarity with *travestis* that can be noticed refers to the occupation of public space in a non-legal fashion. This facilitates the exploitation of street vendors by inspectors and police officers. Itikawa (2004) calculated the incidence, per capita, of the value of the payoffs on a scale that went from 10 to 17% of the street vendor’s earnings, depending on where he worked.

More Expensive Credit and Higher Rent

Housing was one of the most difficult problems the *travestis* studied had to deal with. One such difficulty was the proof of income required by some landlords. Because of the stigma they carry, landlords were convinced that *travestis* would take their customers to the rented property, causing neighbors to complain. As “compensation” for this risk, many landlords charged higher rents and demanded several months of rent in advance. Higher rents due to discrimination are also cited by Kulick (1998), among *travestis* in Salvador, Brazil, and by Welzer-Lang (1994), among different kinds of sex workers in Lyon, France.

In response to these demands, *travestis* resorted to a number of strategies, the main one being the collective renting of a house or apartment. This was the least expensive way to obtain housing, but certain conditions had to be met: a good relationship among tenants—something subject to sudden changes as we shall see further on; a good relationship with neighbors, which depended of local transphobia levels; and good house-keeping habits,¹⁶ something some *travestis* did not have given that they frequently rejected the “housewife” identity.¹⁷

Another common housing strategy was to live in a “madam’s” boarding house. This option was preferred by younger *travestis* for it offered more comfort and security. They could also afford the high costs involved due to the increased income they earned as sex workers. Living in a “madam’s” boarding house was much more expensive than other housing options. In mid-2003, living in one of the two boarding houses in one of the sex work areas of São Paulo’s north zone cost the equivalent of three minimum wages a month. As a result of this expense, living in a boarding house conferred a certain status on the *travesti*.

¹⁶ The principal need was the preparation of meals. Because many *travestis* did not assume this function, they ended up eating in restaurants and bars, generating an expense that in view of how much they earned, was an elevated one.

¹⁷ In another article (García, 2009a), the main feminine identities incorporated by the *travestis* are discussed. Although the “submissive woman” is one of these identities, it manifests itself much more to define the *travesti*’s passive role vis-a-vis the *marido* (companion) than to describe the “housewife” role reserved for women in Brazil’s traditional gender division. Passion and sexuality had a place in their imagined feminine ideal. Housework did not.

However, living with a madam—seen as a dangerous one¹⁸—also meant being subject to her control. Although this relationship was mostly an affectionate one, to the point of serving as a substitute family, violence was always a real possibility whenever the *travestis* failed to pay their daily rent for long periods of time. Whenever they fell behind on their rent, the madam often pressured them to extort or rob their clients.¹⁹ Some *travestis* fled the boarding house, and madams were known to spend years pursuing their former tenants and resorting to violence once they caught them. One of the commonly practiced punishments they described was to cut the face so deeply as to form a permanent scar, something which the *travestis*, always very concerned with their appearance, feared immensely.

Housing-related difficulties were also tied to the handling of earnings, a very important issue among the *travestis* surveyed. There were two main reasons for this. The first one involved the frequent devaluing, or debasing, of the money generated by sex work, which they referred to as “dirty money.”²⁰ Many of the *travestis* interviewed said the money was “cursed,” and that it “entered and exited quickly,” demonstrating the devaluation of the profession itself. If we consider that different cultural systems frequently use the term filth as a criterion to differentiate between what is inside and outside the order of things, as proposed by Douglas (1966), then the expression “dirty money” seems to refer to the moral “filth” of those who earn it.

Proof of income difficulties and the stigma suffered by *travestis* in Brazil also made it hard for them to open or operate bank accounts, complicating their ability to save money in periods of high returns and monetary correction. Aggravating all this was a life style incompatible with their income. This was due to exaggerated expenses with clothes, jewelry, ornaments, and illicit drugs, which would leave many of them destitute and in debt.

The lack of proof of income resulting in more expensive credit and higher rents is also remarked in studies with Brazilian street vendors, leading similarly to exploitation among the street vendors themselves, like the subletting of rooms at prices that are much higher than the market’s. (Ostrower, 2007; Ramires, 2002)

¹⁸ There were times in the group that we were warned not to question the high prices paid by *travestis* to live in boarding houses. We were also told not to suggest housing alternatives at the risk of receiving a *doce* (*travesti* jargon for some form of punishment, which could be physical like a beating, or financial like a robbery).

¹⁹ The risks involved in being indebted to a madam are also described by Benedetti (2000).

²⁰ The debasing of earnings because of sex work’s stigmatization was also seen among *travestis* in Fortaleza, Brazil (Vale, 2000), all kinds of French sex workers (Welzer-Lang, 1994) and female sex workers in New Zealand (Plumridge, 2001) and New York (Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006).

The Lack of Professional Perspectives and Resorting to Illegal Activities

In sex work, aging is usually one element that makes these sex workers to be seen as less attractive. Also, the stigma associated with the profession makes it difficult for these workers who are getting older to find new occupations.

One difference between the researched *travestis* and other sex workers that should be underscored is the much greater difficulty they find to switch occupations because of the transformations their bodies have undergone. While a female sex worker can hide her previous or current profession,²¹ the *travesti* cannot because of the easily identified body transformations that have stigmatized her. This is something that has also been observed by Silva (1993).

In view of this, some of the *travestis* surveyed said they had to *fazer a vida* (make something of their lives) while still young. This was the main motivation for going to Europe, which was accessible to the *deusas* (goddesses). According to Silva (1993), Europe was highly regarded by *travestis* not only because of its money and refinement, but also because it symbolized a crossing of frontiers, analogous to the change of gender they have undergone. Some of the younger *travestis* in the group dreamed of going to Europe, but acknowledged that first they had to achieve a compatible aesthetic standard:

P. said she was saving money for several plastic surgeries and for airfare. She said she would have to start all over again but that this time she would not “make life easy for the *bichas* [faggots]” [by this she meant she planned to extort her clients more than she used to].

But the idea that Europe would give them lifelong financial security was negated by the experiences of some of the group’s *travestis* who had already lived there. One of them achieved partial success in this kind of undertaking, despite the heroin addiction acquired in Italy, by opening a small beauty salon after returning to Brazil. Another, however, was extradited to Brazil on charges of illegal immigration and “involvement” with heroin. And a third person never mentioned the reasons for her failure in this shared project of life.²² These three *travestis* frequently painted a favorable picture of their European clients when comparing them to Brazilians. The Europeans, they said, were more courteous, more frequently “active” in the sexual relationship and paid better.

²¹ Moraes (1996) said that, unlike other stigmatized categories with immediately evident and distinctive traits that cannot be hidden, like Afro-descendants and the handicapped, the sex worker’s stigma is not immediately perceived.

²² Trevisan (2000) cited figures that estimate at 500 the number of *travestis* in France and another 500 in Italy in the mid-1990s. He observed that those in France were accused of “stealing” clients from French female sex workers and of fostering a rise in crime rates. In Italy, many became drug addicts and started trafficking heroin.

Only a few of the older *travestis* who failed to *fazer a vida* [make something of their lives], had professional options other than sex work.²³ Work as a nursing aid was one such job option. Since many of them had a precarious educational background, this option required schooling and a long-term commitment both financially and in terms of time.

They also cited alternative activities usually associated with the homoerotic universe, like careers as *transformistas* [female impersonators], hairdressers, and manicurists. However, in the city of São Paulo, these activities, like female impersonation in night clubs, have been undergoing a process of retraction for some time, and jobs as hairdresser and manicurists in low-income districts paid extremely low wages.

Other jobs that were cited belonged specifically to the *travesti* universe like the *bombadeira* [*travesti* specialized in the home application of liquid silicone]. This was a dangerous occupation because of the constant police crackdowns and the risks involved with the use of industrial silicone. Becoming a *cafetina* was another possibility, but it required a high initial investment:

J. told the group that she once was a madam with a boarding house that had eight *travestis* living in it. It did not work out because she was going through a “high addiction” period. However she said she planned to open a new house.

Another way to earn additional income was the selling of products like clothes, shoes and cosmetics to other *travestis*.²⁴ One of them manufactured vinyl panties specially designed to hide the penis and give the pelvic region a feminine look. Clothing and perfumes were frequently sold at meetings of the group.

Housekeeping in private homes or in *travesti* boarding houses was also cited as an alternative.²⁵ However, this kind of work in boarding houses was looked down on because it implied assuming a subservient position vis-a-vis other *travestis*:

I noticed that some *travestis* were *dando um close* [exhibiting themselves to show their superiority] to V. During the meeting I learned that she had accepted a job as a housemaid in the boarding house owned by P. [a madam],

to whom she owed unpaid rent. V, visibly upset with being in a subservient position before her colleagues, tried to deal with this awkward situation, saying: “*At least I don’t have to wander streets grabbing clients, like many of you, to pay the rent.*” I thought that if she were not more than six feet tall, without heels, V. would easily become her colleagues’ scapegoat.

Another possibility available to them, albeit in a limited form, was to become community health agents. In the case of São Paulo city, this alternative was made available by a program focused on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and AIDS among sex workers, Coordinated by the city’s Health Department, it involved the hiring of some *travestis* as community agents. One of them, who frequently participated in the meetings and who exerted a certain leadership over the others, became a community agent in mid-2002.²⁶

Since job alternatives were either low paying, or few in number, many *travestis* opted to remain in sex work, despite its evident and growing decadence and impoverishment. Among the factors that accounted for its low income yield by keeping potential clients away were age, mainly when more than 40 and, when noticeable, the fact that they had AIDS. The lack of financial support, due to the absence of strong family ties and the frequent and abusive use of drugs, especially crack cocaine, made them uneasy in relation to their future. This was a theme sometimes expressed at the meetings:

A story was told today of a *travesti* from [...], that worked for years on the streets and who started to decline little by little. Unable to pay rent, she lived beneath a viaduct. Now, she was pushing a cart picking discarded cardboard to sell. V. said that she had become a beggar and I noticed that the group was apprehensive, fearing a similar future

To escape from this economic misery many resorted to illicit activities to complement –and at times to replace– sex work. In this context, theft and drug trafficking were among the most cited.

In research with Brazilian street vendors, the lack of professional perspectives and constant indebtedness were also observed to lead many street vendors to seek a quick profit, which in many cases pushes them towards other illegal activities like the sale of contraband merchandise (Itikawa, 2004; Ramires, 2002), cargo theft and product counterfeiting (Mafra, 2007).

²³ This was a highly discussed theme in the group, although we did not encourage them to abandon sex work. We consider the professional recognition of sex work and the improvement of its working conditions to be as important as reflecting on its viability after a certain age. Like other jobs in which aging is an element that limits professional success in Brazil (e.g., models and soccer), it is important to think of alternatives in which age is not such a strong impediment.

²⁴ This was also cited by Benedetti (2005) who saw this function as a response to the discrimination in stores that did not sell the proper sizes and did not allow *travestis* to pay in installments.

²⁵ Some *travestis* worked as housekeepers before becoming sex workers or when they were not earning enough as such.

²⁶ Many of the alternatives to sex work mentioned in the group were similar to those described by Kulick (1998). In Salvador, older *travestis* resorted to drug trafficking, or worked as housemaids for other *travestis*, or owned a food and drink stall. They also worked as *cafetinas* or *bombadeiras*.

Predatory Competition and Association Difficulties

One of the complaints constantly heard at the meetings was the scarcity of clients. Many, comparing the “movement” of customers to previous decades, said it had dropped considerably. They attributed this decline to the advent of AIDS and the fear of clients in the 1980s, and to the increased number of customer robberies in the 1990s. Also mentioned was the impression that the number of *travestis* on the streets was constantly growing.²⁷ Even if we put this comparison in its proper perspective, given that they were made by older *travestis*, and thus less valued on the sex market, it is quite plausible that the first two reasons mentioned have had a negative impact on the number of customers seeking the services of *travestis*. The supposition that there were a greater number of *travestis* is more difficult to evaluate with precision. But we must consider the fact that there is a growing number of aging *travestis* thanks to the emergence, in the 1990s, of antiretroviral drugs for the treatment of AIDS. The use of these drugs, provided free of charge by Brazil’s public health service, has certainly contributed to a significant decrease in premature mortality among this segment of the population.

The most common way to deal with the scarcity of customers was to lower the prices charged for the sexual services provided, which resulted in fierce competition among the *travestis*. The tension this generated was more than evident. One of the pejorative terms used at the meetings illustrates this: *varejeira* (which comes from the Brazilian expression *fazer varejo*, meaning something like “to do retail”). The term was used to describe the practice of charging less for sexual services, much in the same way that store owners promote sales and offer discounts. Although the term had a negative connotation, some *travestis* readily acknowledge they were *varejeiras*, criticizing their colleagues that claimed they charged more than they really did:

During a discussion on prices charged for services, where many claimed to charge 20 or 30 reais, L. told the group: “*Eu faço varejo* [I do retail]. I charge three reais for a blow job and five to fuck.” I noticed a certain silence among the other *travestis* as if she had just described a reality they refused to admit to me, or perhaps to themselves.

Disappointing accounts of remaining on the streets for long periods of times without attracting a single client were also common. Another pejorative term used to depict *travestis* that failed to attract clients was the adjective *penosa* [Portuguese for “the sufferer”]. The term was used to describe the *travesti* that spent a lot of time suffering on the streets.

B. said she would always try to go out with the first customer that appeared, no matter how much he could pay. She said that it was important for her to “open the cash register” because she would get “neurotic” should she fail to attract a customer for several hours.

While some spent most of their time blaming those who robbed clients for the lack of business, others discussed the possibility of forming an organization to set prices and deal with problems intrinsic to their universe. This effort was always incentivized at the group’s meetings, but the *travestis* themselves insisted that it was “very difficult” and that they “never joined forces.”

Kulick (1998) characterized the relationship among *travestis* as one marked by suspicion and distrust, attributing this to the financial difficulties they faced. As a result, they would take advantage of any and all opportunities to reach their objectives, even if it meant betraying their fellow *travestis*. Ferreira (2003) noted the same phenomenon in Belém, where work-related competition and personal antipathy among *travestis* prevailed. The attribution of this competition, by some, to the fact that they were *travestis* negated the fact that it was their working relationships that created this problem among them. Other studies of outdoor sex workers also say that the rivalry in this segment is a consequence of the work modality (Plumridge, 2001; Sharpe, 1998).

Research with street vendors in Brazil also notice that direct competition among them many times generates a “price war” that contributes to their impoverishment. Increased rivalry creates difficulties in the defining and establishment of common interests—something that becomes evident with the problems in the creation and startup of street vendor associations (Ostrower, 2007; Ramires, 2002), in the same way we observed with *travestis*.

The similarities of *travestis*’ and street vendors’ difficulties regarding their work shows the importance of considering the specificity of the *travestis*’ sex work as a modality of work that must be understood beyond its consideration only as a “sex” one. The fact that *travestis* and street vendors in Brazil share the condition of being self-employed informal workers, occupying public spaces helps understand this similarity. In this sense, it is remarkable how some conclusions adopted by the “Resolution concerning decent work and the informal economy” (ILO, 2002) are applicable to *travestis*’ sex workers studied here, as well to the studies regarding Brazilian street vendors referenced before. Among other points, this resolution mentions low requirements for education, skills, technology and capital as the main reason for the existence of the informal economy. It points out that the lack of social protection, because informal workers are not recognized or protected by labor legislation and social protection laws, prevent them from investing in their education and in the skills needed to improve their own employability. It also prevents them from making

²⁷ Ferreira (2003) said “the *travestis* in the city of Belém had the same complaints arising from clients’ fears of AIDS and police extortion, as well as the fights among *travestis* and the thefts they committed.

contributions to social security systems and from having secure property rights, thus depriving them access to both capital and credit. The resolution also observes that, since self-employed persons or employers in the informal economy are sometimes not allowed to operate under local or national legislation, they are often unrecognized and excluded from or under-represented in social dialogue institutions and processes and, since they are normally not organized, they have little or no collective representation vis-à-vis employers or public authorities (pp. 54–56).

Conclusion

Comprehending how sex work is structured was fundamental to the understanding of the universe of the *travestis* researched. We noted that sex work was essential to the existence of *travestis* as a social group and that those surveyed exercised the outdoor modality. The results identified social stigma as a predisposing factor for entrance (and permanence) of *travestis* in the world of sex work.

We concluded that many of the characteristics of the *travestis* were due to the fact that they were informal workers and worked in public spaces. As in the case of other workers in similar conditions, like street vendors, this led to a competition for space, causing their rejection by local residents and store owners who demanded police action. We saw how the lack of formal employment made credit and rent more expensive for them, leading to the exploitation of *travestis* by *travestis*. The fact that sex work is an activity where youth is highly valued meant that older *travestis*, usually with little or no education, had very few professional alternatives, most of which were associated to the *travesti* universe itself. The impoverishment of many of them led to a predatory competition for clients, which affected all of them and made it difficult for them to organize themselves in associations.

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