



'If I don't have sex I'll die of hunger': Covid-19 crisis for Rio's trans sex workers

Brazil is one of the world's most dangerous countries for transgender people. For trans sex workers, the pandemic has intensified the risk

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Global development is supported by

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Thu 21 May 2020 03.15 EDT

Social distancing is keeping people off the streets of central Rio de Janeiro. And that has created serious challenges for its trans sex workers, who have seen their clientele, and their income, melt away.

“You can see what it’s like: empty streets, shops closed, the fallen economy ” says Elba Tavares, 44, from Paraíba state in north-east Brazil. “I am no longer in that rush of prostitution but yes, I sell my body.” But, she says: “There are very few customers.”

Fear and prejudice in Brazil drive many trans people into the sex trade but life on the street for a trans sex worker is never easy.

“Only the strong survive, and I’m not one of the strongest. I’m one of the weakest,” she says, “and weaker for being poor and for being trans. Even if I was trans and had something, the same discrimination would be there.”

Brazil has strong trans movements and civil society organisations but it is one of the most dangerous countries in the world for transgender people, according to Transgender Europe. The murder rate for trans people is the highest in the world.



Elba Tavares waits for clients in central Rio de Janeiro.

Elba is coping with the added challenge of Covid-19 as best she can. “How am I surviving? Well you can see. I get a little from the government but it’s not much. Sometimes I can stop by the house of some friends,” she says. “This is a half-developed country. What is most developed here is crime and corruption, that’s well-developed ... And when the government is not worth anything, nothing else is.”

Tavares has been living in Rio for 20 years. She says her clients are often married men “who like a dose of something for courage”.



Elba Tavares at the place where she is currently living in central Rio.

“I used to get my mother’s skirts and put them on my head, like hair. I liked hanging out with girls,” she says. “I’ve used make-up since I was a child, then I started to take hormones secretly and began creating a feminine appearance.”

In her late teens, Elba says, she started prostituting herself, heading out at night with her clothes in a bag to the spot where other trans sex workers gathered. “My brother was very aggressive. My father too,” she says.

In 1999, she grabbed a lift from a friend to São Paulo, more than 1,000 miles south. In 2000 she moved to Rio and has been here ever since.

Stefany Gonçalves, 26, is a trans sex worker from Espírito Santo state in southeastern Brazil. She says life has been very hard since coronavirus arrived in Rio.



A resident of Casa Nem a shelter for LGBT people in Rio’s Copacabana neighbourhood, enjoys the sunshine in the communal area of the building.

“It’s really difficult, because there’s almost nobody on the street ... I work as a prostitute, so what happens? It’s terrible,” she says. “I still go out, I still have sex, because if I don’t, I’ll die of hunger.”

Stefany is reluctant to discuss her past, but she is open about one thing. “I never had another job,” she says. “This is the only thing I ever had for me.”

She has had some help during the pandemic restrictions. “Thank God there are people who see this. I got a basic food donation. There are people who are doing a little.” Gonçalves says she also received an emergency payment from the government of around £90, one of three planned monthly payments.

“If it was difficult for us before, it’s even more so now,” she says. “I’m in the risk group, I stay at home more now.”



Stefany Gonçalves and a friend, Paula.

A fundraising campaign has been set up to help provide essential food and hygiene products for trans sex workers in the Lapa district of Rio de Janeiro.

Casa Nem, a shelter for LGBTIQ+ people in Rio’s Copacabana neighbourhood, has organised the distribution of basic food parcels to trans people and other vulnerable people in the area. The shelter is also working with the Capacitrans (Trans Training) group to produce face masks made by trans women working at home.

Casa Nem’s founder, trans activist and former sex worker Indianare Siqueira, lived through the Aids epidemic in the 1980s. That was a time, she says, when many people in Brazilian society turned their backs on LGBT people. But the Covid-19 pandemic affects everyone and everyone is at risk.



Residents of Casa Nem have lunch at the TV room.

On 13 March, as coronavirus spread through Europe, she put the shelter into lockdown. “I had the experience of Aids and I knew this [coronavirus] could come to Brazil,” she said.

Casa Nem has set aside a floor to quarantine new arrivals like Caíque Gomes, 20, who fled the prejudice of his parents in Rio’s blue collar Bangu neighbourhood because they objected to the way he dressed and behaved as a gay man. “Here, I saw it’s very different. We can be who we want to be, free,” he said.



Activist Indianare Siqueira prepares to leave Casa Nem to distribute food parcels to trans people and other vulnerable populations.

Siqueira believes that violence and attacks against trans people have increased since right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro – who is notorious for his many homophobic remarks – fought his winning election campaign and took office.

“This social isolation that society is going through is what LGBT people and especially transvestites and transsexuals have always lived with,” she says. “I hope people learn from this.”



Caíque Gomes, 20, sits in his apartment in Casa Nem, where a floor has been set aside to quarantine new arrivals.

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