Brazilian Travestis

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Who are they?
The travestis of Brazil are a distinct group. They are biologically male and do not deny this. They do not seek surgery to alter their genitals. They present themselves in female clothing at all times. Many enhance the femininity of their bodies by taking hormones or even injecting silicone in their chest, hips, and buttocks.

Travestis are not transvestites, nor are they transgendered. These terms are very Western in worldview and do not reflect Brazilian culture. Transvestites are men who dress in women's clothing from time to time. They do not believe that they are women. They do not dress in women's clothing all the time. This is very different from travestis, who present themselves in female clothing at all times. Travestis also permanently alter their bodies to become more feminine.

Transgendered people are people whose physical sex does not match their inner feeling of their gender. This is the idea of a man trapped in a woman's body or vice versa. They see their bodily sex as incorrect and often seek surgeries to reassign their sex. Again, this differs from travestis, who, when prompted, bluntly admit to being male and believe that this fundamentally cannot be changed.

Becoming travestis
In most cases, they begin to realize that they are travestis when they are attracted to boys at a young age. In their first sexual interactions, they always take the passive role. They do not dress in women's clothing all the time. This is very different from travestis, who present themselves in female clothing at all times. Travestis also permanently alter their bodies to become more feminine.

Eventually their parents get upset and force them to leave home. In force, in their first sexual interactions, they always take the passive role. They do not dress in women's clothing all the time. This is very different from travestis, who present themselves in female clothing at all times. Travestis also permanently alter their bodies to become more feminine.

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What is the cultural context?

Carnival
In Brazil, Carnival is a time of celebration before the solemnity of Lent, attended by thousands. It consists of parades, dancing, elaborate costumes, and an overall relaxation of moral norms. Men dress in bright, outrageous women's clothing.

Some researchers believe that the travestis are an extension of Carnival, whereas others believe that the festivities of Carnival overshadow the discrimination that travestis face every day.

Roberta Close
Roberta Close was born as Luiz Roberto Gambine Moreira in 1964. She is generally considered transgender because she had sexual reassignment surgery (which travestis do not). She is a famous actress, voted “Most Beautiful Woman in Brazil” by readers of Sexy, a men’s magazine, in 1969.

Contradictions
Brazilian society is sometimes characterized as very open and accepting, as evidenced by the mass popularity of Roberta Close. Yet travestis often face severe discrimination. Travestis are often characterized as being a “third gender” or a mix of the masculine and feminine, yet travestis often adhere to very strict beliefs about gender.

How many travestis are there in Brazil?

This is a difficult question to answer. The census does not offer “travesti” as a choice for sex. Researchers have attempted to collect data, but due to stigma, travestis often do not wish to disclose their identity.

Some estimates are:
In Rio de Janeiro – 4,000 (out of a population of about 6 million)
In Salvador – 100-250 (out of a population of about 2 million)
All of Brazil – 6,000-8,000 (out of a total population of approximately 192 million)

There are enough travestis that is a clearly defined group that is often written about. Every city has a sizeable population of travestis, who generally live in the same area as each other. There are enough travestis that men know what they are getting when they hire a travesti prostitute.

Prostitution
The majority of travestis engage in prostitution. Research sets this number at about 80%.

Prostitution is not illegal in Brazil. Most of their clients describe themselves as homosexual. Prostitution allows travestis to earn much more money than any other industry. Other types of employers generally do not want to hire travestis.

Clients:
In a study of 150 male who regularly had sex with travestis in São Paulo:
-97.3% identified themselves as heterosexual
-2.7% identified themselves as bisexual
-68% had stable female partners

Prostitution in Italy
Many travestis travel to Italy to work as prostitutes. Most only stay temporarily. Crossing the border with a passport indicating their sex as male can be a problem. They can earn enough money in a few years to buy a house when they return to Brazil. Other travestis lend them money to pay their passage, which often takes a long time to repay. Prostitutes in Italy often get involved with drugs.

What issues do they face?

Harassment
Travestis are often thrown out of their homes because their families refuse to accept them. They face harassment and discrimination from most people they meet, especially the police. Military police often torture travestis, beating and kicking them. Violence against travestis is so common that it rarely gets much media attention except when the violence level is higher than normal.

There was a wave of murders in São Paulo in 1993: 16 travestis were shot in the head between January and March.

Poverty
Travestis generally have to support themselves from a very young age and with little education. Often this means becoming prostitutes.

Health Problems
Common travesti practices, such as ingesting large quantities of hormones, injecting silicone, and prostitution carry significant risks. Hormones and silicone have many unpleasant side effects, especially when consumed in the large quantities travestis tend to use. Prostitution carries the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, most notably AIDS.

In a study of 100 travesti sex workers, 48% tested positive for antibodies to HIV, and 50% had engaged in sex with at least 30 partners in the past month.

Non-binary gender systems throughout culture and time

Many cultures across time have had more gendered categories than merely “men” and “women.”

Some examples:

Thailand and Laos – Kathoey
The term “kathoey” is generally translated to “lady boy” or called the “third sex.” They are born men, but dress as females. The process of becoming a kathoey involves social rites of passage. It is an accepted societal position.

India and Pakistan – Hijra
Hijras are part of an ancient historical tradition. They are born men, dress as females, but their goal is not to fool people; they want to be known as hijras. They are often paid to give their blessings. Hijras marry men or other hijra, the category has to do with gender, not sexual orientation. Some hijra choose to be castrated, but it is not required to be a hijra.

Many American Indian Tribes – Two-Spirited People/Berdache
Many American Indian tribes had two-spirited people, including the Crow, Lakota, Mohave, Navajo, Ojibwa, the Zuni and some Apache groups. These people were a blend of masculine and feminine. They were considered to be more balanced than men or women. They were regarded highly and often were spiritual leaders.

Zapotec (in Modern-day Oaxaca, Mexico) – Muxe
Muxe were biologically male with both masculine and feminine characteristics. Their romantic relations were with females or males; the term does not apply any particular sexual orientation. Some participated in women’s work, such as embroidery.

Sources


Photo Acknowledgements

In pictures: Carnival in Brazil

Roberta Close

A Zuni Two-Spirited Person

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