



Aprosmig

**A Case Study of Sex Worker Organising
in Belo Horizonte, Brazil**

This case study was developed by Heather Larson and designed by Mavi Veloso for the Red Umbrella Fund. It is based on documents provided by APROSMIG during their grant period with the Red Umbrella Fund, online research, and an interview with Cida Vieira, Maria Aparecida da Silva, and Laura Maria do Espirito Santo. Photo credits: APROSMIG.

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Introduction

The **Associação de Prostitutas de Minas Gerais** (APROSMIG) is a sex worker-led group based in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and representing the state of Minas Gerais. Its mission is to promote citizenship and the rights of women sex workers in Brazil. The group designs and implements significant and creative projects and actions, mostly in partnership with other sectors of Brazilian society, from feminist and LGBT groups, to politicians and the Ministry of Health and Justice. APROSMIG has over a hundred members, many of whom are active volunteers for the association.

Key topics that the group addresses are the recognition of sex work as work, sexual and reproductive rights and health for women sex workers, access to services and better treatment facilities for sex workers, violence against sex workers and safer working conditions, and movement building and the mobilisation of women sex workers. APROSMIG's key strategies include the organisation of debates, seminars, and conferences, activities to prevent HIV and STIs, trainings and sex worker-only language courses, lobbying, demonstrations, and outreach.



Booklet for sex workers during the World Cup in Brazil by Igor Fuchs.



Performance with condoms at the launch of the Sex Museum in Belo Horizonte.

The Challenge

Working independently as a sex worker has been legal in Brazil since 2002, but many aspects of sex work are still criminalised and repressed by law enforcement, notably operating brothels (known locally as *zonas*). This puts sex workers in a tricky position: they either work illegally in a brothel, forfeiting their legal rights in exchange for security, or they work from home or elsewhere legally, but where they are more vulnerable to violence.

There is also high social stigma against sex workers in Brazil, and they face frequent violence from police. **Many sex workers fear speaking up against violence and abuse.** The stigma unevenly affects the most vulnerable and unprivileged sex workers, including migrant sex workers from other regions in Brazil and countries in Latin America.

HIV prevalence amongst sex workers in Brazil is low and condom use is high, but in recent years a national level rights-based anti-stigma HIV prevention campaign, created by sex workers and

the Ministry of Health, has been replaced by a campaign that focuses solely on condom use, with no reference to citizenship or human rights.¹

International events such as the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the upcoming 2016 Olympic Games lead to crack-downs on the sex work industry in Brazil. There is a public misconception that the large influx of tourists that high-profile sporting events bring to cities results in a higher demand for sex worker's services – so-called “sex tourism” – while in reality demand does not increase. **State-enforced crackdowns on prostitution, including the 2014 raids of brothels and clubs in the city of Niterói in the state of Rio de Janeiro, make it more challenging for sex workers to operate safely.** On a policy level selling sex is considered legal, but many officials have reservations about tourists traveling to Brazil to buy sex. Sex work is also often conflated with sex trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children. A conservative media, social, and political environment means that these issues are hard to talk about in public debate.

¹ - “HIV and AIDS in Brazil,” May 2015, <http://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/latin-america/brazil>

The Changes

APROSMIG has been working since 2009 to address the challenges sex workers in the region face and to strengthen the Brazilian, Latin American, and global sex worker movements. From community outreach to political action, the group has made great strides in empowering sex workers and decreasing violence against them.

Being sex worker-led is an important aspect of APROSMIG's success. The group recognises that while it is important to fight stigma and discrimination from outside the community, it is also important to build up self-confidence, self-acceptance, and solidarity within the sex worker community. The interactions between group members and the community are horizontal, which builds confidence and trust among the women. The group organised Puta Dei, a national event to celebrate International Sex Worker's Day on June 2, and the Miss Prostitute competition as creative ways to bring attention to the negative impacts of stigma and increase self-esteem among sex workers. A social outing to the historic city of Ouro Preto gave members of APROSMIG the chance to participate in a fun event together and consolidate their experiences as members of an association.

APROSMIG is also well aware of the importance of engaging with other sectors to reach their goals. **The development of a strong relationship with the military police of Minas Gerais has resulted in a notable decrease in violence against sex workers in the area.** The group is glad that there were no murders of sex workers reported in Belo Horizonte in 2015. Sex workers are encouraged and assisted by APROSMIG to report cases of physical, verbal, and economic violence to the police, and, conversely, the police frequently consult the group when dealing with sex worker cases.

The group has had the support of the Ministry of Health and Justice, which helped it to create an extensive public health services referral network. Volunteers from APROSMIG, all of whom are current or former sex workers, process referrals,

support other sex workers to access doctors, and accompany women to the hospital. The number of unwanted pregnancies among sex workers has dropped as a result of workshops that APROSMIG has given in hotels on sexual and reproductive health, including the topics of condom use and access to birth control.

APROSMIG provides legal counselling, promoting access to social benefits, and training participants to deal with situations such as arrest and violence from the police or clients. They have worked with the urbanisation company URBEL to include older sex workers in the social housing system. In workshops on entrepreneurship sex workers learn how to open a business bank account and use debit and credit machines, which are much safer than cash and help to avoid situations of violence with clients.

The FIFA World Cup in 2014 presented new challenges and opportunities for trainings. In English classes sex workers learned how to negotiate with foreign clients, and APROSMIG developed a pocket-size book called **Putá Livro**, a bilingual reference exclusively designed for the community and clients with ready-to-use expressions. Clearer communication leads to a safer work environment. **Sex workers learned how to talk about their profession, advocate for themselves, and articulate the difference between sex work and trafficking in media training workshops.**



Debit machines are increasing safety and earnings of sex workers.



Sex workers present Guia Das Putas, a tourist guide with sex workers' tips and recommendations.

In addition to sex worker health and safety, APROSMIG has also done a lot of work to raise sex worker self-esteem and solidarity, as well as visibility in the broader community. The group helped to organise the **Marcha das Vadias** (SlutWalk) in 2014, a movement that calls for an end to rape culture, marching in protest against using women's appearance as an excuse or explanation of rape. This partnership has strengthened over the years and is important because some groups that participate in the event do not accept sex work as work, so it is a constant dialogue to have sex workers validated and valued as a part of the feminist movement.

Participation in the LGBT parade in Belo Horizonte and Contagem allowed the group to show solidarity with the gay, lesbian, and trans movements, whose populations also experience stigmatisation and discrimination, while bringing visibility to the struggle of sex workers. The parade was attended by 30,000 people.

The group has established itself as an important public actor in the region. The City of Belo Horizonte included APROSMIG as an organiser

for the popular event Virada Cultural on the Guaicurus street. It was a public, cross-sectoral event in an essential cultural and historical space in the city, which is also the home of the APROSMIG office. The group organised a fashion show of the late **Gabriela Leite's** fashion label Daspu ("from the whores"). The show was a collective performance by cisgender women and transvestites that promoted pride in prostitution and represented the partnership between cis women and transvestites.

APROSMIG is well known and the group is regularly sought out to give lectures at universities and attend academic seminars. During the World Cup, APROSMIG helped to bring national and international visibility to sex workers and became known as a reference for sex workers in Brazil. Contrary to popular media, the event did not, in fact, bring about an influx in demand for sex workers² nor did it increase the number of trafficking victims reported that year.

2 - "Observatory of Prostitution report on World Cup sex tourism in Rio," June 2014, <http://redlightr.io/observatory-of-prostitution-report-on-world-cup-sex-tourism-in-rio/>

MUSEU DO SEXO DAS PUTAS



Photo exhibition at the Sex Museum in Belo Horizonte.

What next?

APROSMIG is an important part of the sex worker movement in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, and all of Brazil. The group participates in PLAPERTS, a coalition of sex worker activists and organisations from Latin America that encourages policy dialogues and joint advocacy on issues affecting sex workers. The group has opened a Sex Museum, named after Hilda Furacão, a legendary sex worker from Minas Gerais.

What difference did the Red Umbrella Fund make?

The Red Umbrella Fund is a sex worker-led fund created in 2012 through a collaboration of donors and sex worker activists. The Red Umbrella Fund supports sex worker-led groups in any country of the world – without geographic limits and open to unregistered organisations – and grants are unrestricted core funding meant to respond to the actual needs of sex workers. In just four years, the Red Umbrella Fund has provided 78 grants in 45 countries to organisations and networks led by sex workers.

The Red Umbrella Fund was APROSMIG's first institutional funder, providing a core support grant for €20,000 in 2013. Support from the Red Umbrella Fund has enabled APROSMIG to strengthen the organisation's capacity, allowing the group to purchase computers, make educational brochures on topics such as sex work and migration, and organise events like Puta Dei. According to APROSMIG, the partnership with the Red Umbrella Fund was fundamental for achieving its goals. The group was able to advance and learn, and the partnership acted as an entry point to an extended network, an important tool for movement strengthening. With the support of the Red Umbrella Fund, APROSMIG became more respected as an organisation and increased its funding capacity, successfully applying for funding from the Brazil Human Rights Fund.

An important benefit of receiving core, flexible funding from the Red Umbrella Fund is that it has given APROSMIG president Cida Vieira the capacity to be more active in advocacy work.

In 2014 Vieira became a member of the National Council on Trafficking in Persons in Brazil (CONATRAP). CONATRAP is an advisory committee to the Supreme Court of Brazil, comprised of experts who advise judges in high level cases. Vieira's role is to explain and advise on linkages between immigration and sex work which, in her experience, are distinct from trafficking. Her spot on the committee ensures sex worker participation in the main political forum that debates issues around trafficking in persons in Brazil. She has come up against resistance within the committee, as sex tourism is still perceived as a bad practice and **the notion that people migrate for sex work is not fully understood or accepted**, nor do people have a clear understanding of the vulnerabilities of migrant sex workers. Vieira courageously denounced violations against sex workers during the 2014 World Cup and the violent and illegal raids of brothels in Niterói at that time.

Vieira has also had the opportunity to engage with the Ministry of Health, participating in committees and sharing the good practices learned with the Latin American sex worker network Plataforma Latinoamericana de Personas que Ejercen el Trabajo Sexual (PLAPERTS). She ran for public office in 2014 representing the Communist Party (PCdoB) and with a transparent platform of sex work activism. While she was not elected, her campaign increased APROSMIG's visibility and encouraged members of the group to become more politically active.