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A Place at the Table: Sex Workers and Allies in the Redefinition of Brazil's Anti-Trafficking Law

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Abstract: The present article is a brief account of the representational politics surrounding the insertion of the Brazilian prostitutes' movement into anti-trafficking policy-making, following the 2013 death of Gabriela Leite, one of the founders and principal leaders of the movement. Leite's death left an organizational hole in the attempts by one of Brazil's oldest sex worker NGOs, Davida, to secure a place for sex workers at the policy-making table in the rewriting of the country's anti-trafficking laws. Here, we relate how sex workers, academics, journalists, and activists came together to attempt to patch that hole, successfully fighting for sex worker representation in the governmental organs overseeing the struggle against human trafficking in Rio and, more broadly, Brazil. The re-organization of this project following the death of Gabriela highlights how multifaceted alliances between differently positioned actors can leverage the visibility and power of sex workers in culture and politics, creating opportunities to implement policies that favor prostitute rights.

Keywords: structural interventions; progressive policies; stigma; discrimination; Brazil



Citation: Blanchetteç, Thaddeus Gregory. 2022. A Place at the Table: Sex Workers and Allies in the Redefinition of Brazil's Anti-Trafficking Law. *Social Sciences* 11: 530. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11110530>

Academic Editors: Cecilia M. Benoit and Andrea Mellor

Received: 28 July 2022

Accepted: 19 October 2022

Published: 18 November 2022

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1. Introduction

When Gabriela Leite, died from cancer in 2013, Brazil's politically organized prostitutes'¹ movement was deprived of a key leader at a crucial point in its history. Gabriela's friends, family, and colleagues were personally devastated by her untimely death, but its political consequences were also potentially disastrous. During the preceding decade, political and financial support in Brazil (and internationally) had been moving away from sex worker-led NGOs towards groups (often religious in orientation) engaged in the so-called "struggle against modern slavery", understood to be human trafficking (Doezema 2010; Bernstein 2010, 2012; Blanchette and DaSilva 2014). Gabriela hated the "human trafficking" discourse, labeling it a "sinister distraction" from the greater question of how to guarantee sex workers' human, political, and labor rights. However, the George W. Bush administration's decision in 2003 to prohibit U.S. aid to organizations that didn't expressly condemn prostitution and human trafficking (aka, "The Prostitution Pledge"—Masenior and Beyer 2007) inextricably confusing the two phenomena in the public mind and policy, made it clear to Gabriela and others in Brazil's sex worker movements that the moral panic regarding human trafficking had to be addressed. My partner, Dr. Ana Paula da Silva, and I had recently finished a preliminary study regarding trafficking in Rio de Janeiro and how it was being erroneously associated with "sexual tourism" and "the sexual exploitation of children" in the media, academia, and public policy (Blanchette and DaSilva 2005). As part of our ethical responsibility to return our scientific results to the communities we study as ethnographers, we had contacted Gabriela and offered up our report to her NGO, Davida. In discussions with Gabriela, we formulated a plan to bring the organized representatives of Brazil's sex worker movements to the policy-making table by inserting Gabriela as a representative in the municipal, state, and federal committees that were reworking Brazil's anti-trafficking laws. Gabriela had a long history of working with academic allies to improve sex work conditions in Brazil. She thus approved of the notion that Thaddeus

would be her substitute and Davida's technical representative for issues regarding human trafficking, permitting her to dedicate herself primarily to issues that were of more import to Brazilian prostitutes, in particular legal challenges and bills designed to completely decriminalize and perhaps regulate sex work. Thaddeus would attend routine meetings in Gabriela's stead, meet with her periodically to report what had happened, and call her in when her political knowledge, influence, and ability to directly represent sex workers was crucial. By late 2012, after a mobilization of Davida's extensive network of political allies, Gabriela had been elected to the state and federal anti-trafficking committees by an electorate made up of representatives of Brazil's gender- and sexuality-oriented NGOs.

Shortly afterwards, Gabriela Leite died of cancer.

The present article is an examination of what happened next and of some of the issues we encountered in attempting to secure prostitutes' place at the decision-making table in a hostile policy-making process directed towards revamping Brazil's anti-trafficking laws.

2. Davida (Re)enters the Anti-Trafficking Debate

Gabriela was a globally legendary firebrand who had led sex worker protests against state violence and social hypocrisy since the 1970s. Together with Lourdes Barreto, she had founded the Brazilian Prostitutes' Network (Rede Brasileira das Prostitutas—RBP) in the 1980s and had successfully pushed federal and state governments to incorporate sex workers as educators and protagonists into Brazil's much acclaimed and successful public response to HIV-AIDS. In the 1990s, she had worked tirelessly in local and national politics through her NGO, Davida, to make space for sex workers at the public health policy table. By the early 2000s, when the authors of the present article met her, Gabriela was pushing the national prostitutes' movement to go beyond health issues and concentrate on pressurizing governments to decriminalize and fully legalize sex work. In 2012, Gabriela was almost elected to the Brazilian House of Representatives. Undeterred by her narrow loss, she worked with an ally, Federal Deputy Jean Wyllys, who had been elected to write a bill for the regulation of sex work, PL 4211—the Gabriela Leite Bill (posthumously titled)—which was presented to the Brazilian Congress by Wyllys (Wyllys 2012). This bill would allow sex workers to be recognized as legal employees and independent laborers under Brazilian law. Although criticized by radical feminist opponents as a “measure supporting pimps”, the bill in fact restricted the amount of surplus that could be extracted from third party sex work, and would have been the first law ever in Brazilian history to set strict limits on employers' financial exploitation of workers of any sort. More importantly, the bill would have cleared the way for sex worker-owned and -operated collectives in Brazil's sexual commercial economy, as well as retirement, health, and safety benefits for sex workers under Brazil's existing labor laws² (for more information on the history of Davida, see Leite 2009; Magalhães 1987; Murray 2013, 2015; Skackauskas 2012; Strack 1996).

Obviously, the leadership of Davida and the RBP's turn towards legal protection for sex workers created much controversy, both within and without the prostitutes' movement. Radical feminists and religious groups who sought to abolish prostitution quickly demonized the initiative, at a time when Brazil was beginning to undergo a moral panic regarding trafficking of persons and the sexual exploitation of children prior to the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games, both of which would be held in Brazil (Blanchette and DaSilva 2016; Mitchell 2016). At the same time, Gabriela had called for sex worker organizations to cut their relationship with Brazil's Health Ministry unless the federal government began to take seriously sex worker demands on health, safety, and labor issues outside of the realm of combatting HIV-AIDS (Murray et al. 2019a, 2019b). This caused friction and fractioning within the national sex workers' movement, as the Health Ministry was the sole source of financial support received by many organizations.

There has never been much money dedicated, globally or nationally, to sex worker organizations. As Elizabeth Pisani puts it, reflecting on her years of labor in combatting the global HIV-AIDS crisis, “the overwhelming majority of voters have been told by their religious leaders, elders or their politicians that these behaviors [i.e., prostitution and sex

outside of marriage, among other things] are wicked. So even if they do them, they rarely demand help to do them more safely. There are not many votes in doing nice things for wicked people. Rich countries don't want to pay for it and poor countries don't want to do it." (Pasiani 2008, p. 316)

Faced with this, Pasiani characterizes the response of the typical funding agency asked to choose between funding, for example, projects to aid prostitutes, or projects that attempt to eliminate prostitutes in the following manner:

"Weigh up the options. Do I scrape around for money to do the things that will lose votes, or get showered with money to do the things that will win votes? Hmmmmmm . . ." (Ibid., idem)

As Elizabeth Bernstein has pointed out (Bernstein 2010, 2012), the global anti-trafficking movement that coalesced around the 2003 signing of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (also known as the Palermo Protocol) made use of this fundamental fact of human realpolitik to shift attention away from "aiding sinners" and towards "combatting exploiters", often through the expedient of criminalizing sin. One result of this was the George W. Bush government's insistence that aid to combat HIV-AIDS in Africa be linked to policies promoting monogamy and chastity. Another was the "Prostitution Pledge".

The Davida organization first and foremost supported sex workers in their struggles against criminalization and stigmatization. As such, the NGO's leadership united with other AIDS NGOs and the National AIDS Program/Brazilian Ministry of Health at the time, under the government of then-president Luiz Ignácio "Lula" da Silva, to formally refuse more than \$48 million dollars for HIV prevention and resist the Bush government's attempts to pressurize Brazil to stop aid to sex work organizations engaged in the struggle against HIV-AIDS. While the Brazilian Ministry of Health did provide funding to continue the projects that were in motion at the time in the short term, in the long-term NGOs such as Davida did not receive the same level of financial and political support.

Almost simultaneously, the U.S. began funding studies of human trafficking in Brazil and attempts to "conscientize" the political class regarding "the scourge of modern slavery". As we have described elsewhere, US ID funding, denied to groups such as Davida whose leaders wouldn't sign the "Pledge", was lavishly supplied to a consortium of religious and academic groups with no prior research experience in prostitution, to produce an inaugural report that situated human trafficking in Brazil as effectively synonymous with prostitution. This report had an enormous impact on public opinion and policy making, being incessantly cited by the media, NGOs and politicians as a detailed and accurate description of trafficking in Brazil. The fact that it was neither was immaterial: here was a clear call to any NGO or publicly funded organization that, from here on, in the political field of sex work policies, attention and funding would only be given to those groups who, in one way or another, "combated trafficking".

Davida's leaders found it increasingly more difficult to achieve funding as the growing global moral panic surrounding human trafficking led to moneys being redirected from sex worker-led organizations to NGOs which had never before dealt with sex work—many of which were religious organizations that were openly hostile to any sort of sexuality that was not monogamous and faith-based. One solution was Gabriela's creation of the globally famous Daspú ("of the whores") fashion line. On catwalks set up in red-light districts throughout Brazil, the Daspú brand promoted sex worker inclusion and political mobilization, while also bringing in a small amount of cash to Davida through clothing sales. Unfortunately, this was nowhere near enough to meet the NGO's financial needs (Lenz 2008; Bortolanza 2011).

Although the NGO's financial situation was dire, Davida's leaders decided that they would not bow to pressures to moderate their language favoring the decriminalization of sex work (Davida 2005). The political situation was also worsening, however. As anthropologist and congressional researcher Maia Sprandel has pointed out (Dias and

Sprandel 2011, the agendas and policy suggestions that had been carefully curated and represented by Gabriela Leite's generation of sex work activists were being increasingly shouldered aside at all levels—municipal, state, and federal—by the perceived need to “combat trafficking”. This demand rose to an even greater pitch towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, as Brazil was slated to host the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympics.

This was the context, then, in which Gabriela agreed to our proposal to “deal with” the anti-trafficking issue for Davida. As Gabriela remarked at the time, in a conversation with the authors, “It’s absolutely ridiculous that anyone demand that Davida support ‘anti-trafficking’.”

Prostitutes have been one of the main—and sometimes the only—voice speaking for prostitutes’ human rights in Brazil. Trafficking, for us, is simply indistinguishable from any other kind of forced labor or slavery. Of COURSE we are against the enslavement and abuse of prostitutes. That has been the entire point of the organization from the beginning. If you think about it, we were the first so-called “anti-trafficking” organization in Brazil, insofar as we were pointing out the abuse and coercion of sex workers before anyone else. It is infuriating that, at a moment in which we are finally making our political demands heard on the national stage, we have to spend time and energy on a fake demand that has been fabricated, whole cloth, from outside the movement. A demand which any sane person would recognize as being met simply by the very existence and political concerns of the prostitutes’ movement as these stand. We aren’t “entering the trafficking debate”: we’re being forced to explain to people why sex work isn’t trafficking. Again.³

Davida as an organization was in a very weak position; there were far too many sex worker-generated issues on the NGO’s agenda for the organization to waste time, money, and energy on something that seemed tailor-made to delegitimize the voices of sex workers. Nevertheless, the women of Davida agreed that someone needed to engage with the newly forming anti-trafficking sphere.

3. Representativity and Alliances with Academics

If Gabriela had one problem, it was that she was perhaps *too* effective a voice for prostitutes’ rights. She took on too many tasks, while simultaneously attempting to train an upcoming generation of sex worker advocates and allies. A significant part of Brazil’s organized sex workers looked to her for leadership. Academics and researchers saw in Davida a partner for ethical collaborations. Dozens upon dozens of various projects (research and otherwise) passed over Gabriela’s “desk”, generally after hours in one of the many dive bars she loved to frequent after a hard day’s work fighting for political crumbs for Brazilian prostitutes. With relatively few members and almost non-existent funding, the Davida led by Gabriela specialized in creating alliances with non-sex workers and their organizations, to potentialize the NGO’s money and efforts. There was just too little of Gabriela Leite and her alliance of sex worker activists to go around.

Gabriela had not been unaware of this problem, and had worked to “train up” sex workers to aid her and fill her shoes, if necessary. As she had once complained to us, regarding a United Nations’ request, this was a Sisyphean task. A UN⁴ agency had requested a Brazilian sex worker representative, with the proviso that said person be a cis-gendered, working-class-origin woman of African descent (preferably resident of one of Rio’s many favelas). As Gabriela complained at the time:

Do the gringos think Brazilian sex worker activists grow on trees, like bananas? It’s hard enough to find a trustworthy and intelligent person who can competently represent whores. It takes years of unpaid training and education to bring them up to speed on the issues Brazilian sex workers face—not just her, mind you: all sex workers. And it’s a lot of conflicting issues and interests! Then you have

to deal with the inevitable political complexities because a position like this, working for the U.N., doesn't come around often! You have one person chosen and everyone thinks it should have been them. The RBP works because we strive for consensus and to spread what few resources are available as much and as widely as possible. How are we to deal, adequately, with a thing like this? And then, on top of everything else, they come to me and demand that I find them a person who also meets their demands for appropriate color and class coding? Demands that are not internal to the movement, mind you, but solely in function of the UN's need to be politically correct . . . ? Please. I told them to piss off.⁵

This comment by Gabriela throws light on the problem of representativity that sex workers and their allies face globally: who speaks for sex workers?

The general and rote response to this question seems to be obvious: sex workers themselves. But what to do when there are few, if any, sex workers willing to expose themselves to the pitiless eye of the media and the political establishment to advocate for the rights of a group that may be criminalized and, in any case, is heavily stigmatized? The meditations of Erving Goffman on stigma (Goffman 1963) only go so far here in answering this question. In a city such as Rio de Janeiro, where sex work has historically been tolerated if it is conducted in certain times and places (Blanchette and Schettini 2018), stigma management is relatively easy for many women in sex work (note the "relatively"). Because the sale and purchase of sex is not criminalized in Brazil, sex workers are quite capable of living dual lives without too great a threat of being "outed". However, because sex work is extralegally but effectively managed behind the scenes by Brazil's security forces (Blanchette et al. 2017), the consequences for speaking out as a sex worker can be dire. It should be remembered here that Gabriela Leite's first political act as a sex worker was to organize a protest in the city of São Paulo, to draw attention to the fact that members of the city's security forces were disappearing sex workers from red light districts during the waning years of Brazil's military dictatorship.

In Brazil, then, it is relatively easy to engage in sex work and still conduct a "normal, respectable" life, a fact that observers of prostitution have commented on for decades (Pereira 1968). At the same time, sex workers who speak up can expect to be targeted by both the owners and managers of sex work venues and their silent partners in the police and the judicial system. Minimally, outspoken sex workers will find themselves banned from certain commercial sex venues. The maximal penalty, as one of our sex-working interlocutors put it, could be "a shallow grave in an abandoned railyard behind [a certain red light district]".

In such a situation, the operative strategy for many sex workers is to not make waves unless absolutely necessary.

Even if a prostitute is determined to (as is the term) "cause a scandal", the obstacles are many. Laura Murray has extensively documented how, for example, to declare oneself a victim of police or criminal violence in Rio, sex workers must effectively give up not only sex work, but any pretense of political activity in order to access a bare minimum of legal and financial aid from NGOs and government agents (Murray 2014). In such a situation, a woman who had been earning something in the order of BRL 9000 per month and supporting an extended family with this income can quickly find herself with no resources at all. It takes a tremendous degree of political education and willpower, as well as wide-reaching alliances with sex worker allies in the media and the political and legal systems, to effectively confront such a situation. These sorts of emotional and intellectual resources are not cultivated overnight, as Gabriela pointed out. They must be produced by the sex workers themselves, generally without any outside subsidies.

To thus presume that a sex worker organization can find "appropriate" spokespeople to meet NGO or government demands for representativity is a problem, even in the best of times. This problem is potentialized by the violence and health issues sex workers face.

Even when an appropriate sex worker representative is available and has time, energy, and the ability to speak to politicians and the press, their representativity can be, and

often is, questioned in its “authenticity” by would-be gatekeepers, particularly those who oppose the decriminalization of sex work. For these people, the issue is often supremely moral, and the logic of the cancellation or delegitimization of the voices of sex workers who disagree with the gatekeepers takes on a tactical importance that supersedes any ethical considerations. During our work with Davida’s members on the anti-trafficking issue, we saw this dynamic play out on many occasions. If a sex worker publicly stands up to state her opinion, she will be qualified as “too wealthy and successful”. If a poorer worker steps up, she will be “too white”. If a black or brown prostitute takes her place, she will be decried as “too educated”. This dynamic will continue to absurd extremes, until the only sex worker allowed to speak as “authentic” is a mentally ill street person with a substance abuse problem who is barely articulate . . . and, of course, she will be disqualified as a hapless victim who knows nothing of her situation, let alone that of other people.

In such a situation, sex workers often find that they face stigma and potential violence in speaking out against the violation of their rights (either in favor or against a given policy), only to discover that their words are easily dismissed as “not representing REAL prostitutes”. It is difficult to think of any other oppressed group whose leaders are similarly and routinely disqualified for being too articulate, too intelligent, or too successful.

Gabriela Leite had found that an effective counter to this dilemma were multifaceted alliances among differently positioned actors who could leverage the visibility and power of sex workers in culture and politics, creating opportunities to implement policies that favor prostitute rights. Daspú, the fashion line, was an excellent example of this. Allied fashion designers created clothes for catwalks, while Davida activists designed political t-shirts to mix in with the high fashion and sell to the spectators. Friendly journalists would be recruited to communicate with the public and cover shows. Celebrities who supported sex worker rights would be mixed in with sex workers, academics, students, and housewives on the catwalk, to viscerally demonstrate that sex workers cannot be magically discerned from non-sex workers (or, indeed, from fashion models).

Davida members thus often worked in what we liked to describe as a “tag team”. When sex worker voices could be heard and sex workers were willing to talk, Davida leaders created space for them. But they often did so by using non-sex workers to open up spaces, run interference with hostile audiences or—in Thaddeus’ case—to talk to and report back on political agents who, in the name of “combatting modern slavery”, were all too willing to throw prostitutes under the bus.

4. Good Cop, Bad Cop

From 2006 to 2011, the authors attended every anti-trafficking seminar, round table, symposium, workshop, and “consciousness-raising” session we could, in Rio de Janeiro—and often in other cities—as “unofficially official” representatives of Davida. As academics studying sex work, trafficking, and sexual tourism, we could not be excluded from most events and our credentials allowed us entrance into some venues that most certainly would not have accepted sex workers—presuming sex workers even wanted to attend. We followed up these events with periodic meetings with Gabriela to report on what we had seen, said, and heard. From 2009 on, this job increasingly fell on Thaddeus’ shoulders alone, as Ana Paula began to conduct research into sex work, sex tourism and anti-trafficking policies in the city of São Paulo.

One of the advantages of this arrangement, we quickly discovered, is that Gabriela and Thaddeus could create a “good cop, bad cop” dynamic.

Thaddeus could attend an event and, as an academic and a non-spokesperson for Davida, someone who held no official position with the group, and who was beholden to no NGO for a salary, they could be as aggressive as necessary in questioning why a given event or organization did not invite sex workers to have a place at the debating table. Thaddeus could thus be a “bad cop”, sounding out anti-sex work myths and ideologies in anti-trafficking organizations and pushing them (often very much against their desires) to take a public stand on sex worker rights. If the organization was sincere in the desire

to aid sex workers (instead of, for example, combatting the vague chimera of “trafficking” through “awareness raising”), they could invite Gabriela or another Davida member to a follow-up meeting. Gabriela would then play “good cop”: the quite reasonable sex worker representative who was willing to dialog with sympathetic organizations.

In this way, Davida let it be known that the organization was aggressively monitoring the anti-trafficking debate and was willing to “cause a scandal” if sex workers were systematically excluded from it. At the same time, if Thaddeus’ actions offended any person or group, Davida could dismiss them as an “overzealous academic who did not represent Davida or any other sex worker group”. Offended parties could be placated, if necessary, with the contact information for Thaddeus’ department or ethics in research committee. Space limitations prevent us from going into greater detail here. Suffice it to say, as sociologist Sérgio Buarque de Holanda ([1936] 2015) and anthropologist Roberto DaMatta (1997) point out, in a highly hierarchical, ex-slave-holding society such as Brazil, *cordiality* is a characteristic prized perhaps above all others. One does not openly question one’s betters. As Buarque de Holanda comments, this ethic understands “serious discussion” as something conducted between social equals and only *conceded* as a favor to one’s social inferiors. By pushing the limits of cordiality, Thaddeus’ behavior quickly and efficiently alerted Davida as to which agents and agencies it was worth spending time and energy to dialog with, in the anti-trafficking field: those which were willing to at least conceptualize sex workers as notional equals.

Gabriela would, of course, go to major anti-trafficking events organized at the federal and state level where it was essential to have her veteran sex worker-oriented eye and voice center stage (or at least as close to the stage as we could manage). In these situations, Thaddeus’ “bad cop” role continued, particularly in terms of running interference against those who attempted to dismiss Gabriela. An example of this occurred early in our partnership in a national anti-trafficking conference in 2006 in Brasília, when a Catholic anti-trafficking activist and social worker attempted to publicly disqualify Gabriela as “not really” a prostitute because she was a “sociologist”.⁶ Thaddeus was “tagged in” by Gabriela and remarked that there was not a sociology department in the world that would hire a woman with two years of undergraduate sociology under her belt. Thaddeus pointed out that the social worker was ignoring Gabriela’s hard-won decades of experience as a sex worker and sex worker advocate, by trying to cast her as an “inauthentic academic”—a status which her and her department would deny to Gabriela on almost every other conceivable occasion, particularly when it came to peer review. Gabriela was thus able to serenely ignore the woman’s comment as beneath her dignity, and continued on with her exposition.

Shortly after this, at the same event, Gabriela likewise intervened on Thaddeus’ behalf. In presenting our work on sex tourism and trafficking in Rio, Thaddeus was surrounded by four young women from the Federal Women’s Ministry who were sex work abolitionists. They loudly declared that Thaddeus could not speak about prostitution because he was not a woman and “there wasn’t a woman on Earth who was in favor of prostitution”. At this point, Gabriela stood up and said, quite politely, “I am a woman and a sex worker, my dears, and I support a woman’s right to sell sex if that is what she wants to do”.

In this way, during the period stretching from 2006–2012, Davida’s leaders were able to use academics like ourselves in order to infiltrate the burgeoning new anti-trafficking political field in Brazil, while saving the vast amount of the NGO members’ energies for struggles that meant much more to sex workers on the ground, such as discussing and drafting what would later become known as the Gabriela Leite Bill.

As mentioned above, by 2012, Davida had accumulated enough political capital in this field to enable Gabriela to run for and win seats on Rio de Janeiro’s state and Brazil’s federal anti-trafficking committees, organizations which would be the principal sites for the confection of the country’s new anti-trafficking law which would bring Brazil into compliance with the Palermo Protocols. Our plan was to continue and intensify the work begun over the previous seven years. Thaddeus would be Gabriela’s voice on the

committees and would sit in for her during most of their quotidian labors, reporting to her and Davida—and also to the Brazilian Prostitutes' Network—what was happening, so that the RBP could mobilize if and when needed, to head off any attempts to turn the new anti-trafficking laws into anti-prostitution laws. Gabriela would attend meetings in Brasília and final discussions and voting. She would also use her political contacts to ensure that Thaddeus would not be alone in pushing a pro-sex workers' rights agenda in the Committees.

This plan, however had to be radically readjusted when Gabriela lost her battle with cancer in 2013.

5. Rewriting Brazil's Anti-Trafficking Laws, 2013–2016

The remaining members of Davida decided that the anti-trafficking field could not be abandoned by the prostitutes' movement, even though Gabriela Leite was no longer here. Following her death, Thaddeus became the "official" representative on both committees, but it was quickly decided that we needed another sex worker leader to take their place at the federal level, where the law drafting process was soon to begin. Aparecida "Cida" Vieira of the Minas Gerais Prostitutes' Association (APROSMIG) was thus approached for the position through the RBP. Cida accepted.

The problem was that Aparecida had only notionally been following the anti-trafficking debate, being far more (and correctly) concerned with reinforcing her own local NGO at a time when the city of Belo Horizonte was rumored to be thinking of expulsing all sex workers from the city center in preparation for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. As it turned out, however, the position as Davida/RBP representative on the Federal Committee provided an excellent opportunity for Cida to expand her knowledge of the trafficking debate and, more importantly, to create a series of new alliances with friendly organizations on the Committee. Thaddeus moved into a secondary position as Cida's technical advisor and occasional substitute on the Committee⁷. Meanwhile, the Rio de Janeiro State Committee, having fulfilled its initial labors with the other state committees in preparing the grounds for the new law, began to focus more on day-to-day anti-trafficking issues in Rio. Thaddeus thus became the primary representative of Davida on that committee, backed up by Dr. Da Silva and Dr. Laura Murray. Davida also strengthened its alliances with the Transrevolução trans-movement, led by sex worker and substitute City Councilwoman (after 2016) Indianara Siqueira. Following Gabriela's death, Indianara increasingly began to take on the role of providing a sex-working voice in local anti-trafficking politics.

Again, it must be stressed that the so-called anti-trafficking struggle was also not considered a priority by Transrevolução, for the exact same reasons as earlier articulated by Gabriela Leite. It was seen as an imposed agenda that in no way dealt with the real demands and needs of the sex-working population labeled as "vulnerable to trafficking". Indianara, however, like Gabriela, understood the need to engage with the growing anti-trafficking political field, if only to ensure that it would not become a platform for attacking sex workers. She thus met with the state committee on several occasions and gave public talks, whenever necessary, to present a first-hand sex-working understanding of the supposed linkages between prostitution and human trafficking. As Gabriela Leite had insisted before her, Indianara concentrated on pointing out how an excessive focus on "sexual exploitation" in trafficking had blinded the Brazilian movement to the much greater issue of labor exploitation in general, particularly of children and adolescents. "What I want to know," she asked, shortly after the 2014 FIFA World Cup, "is why everyone is so concerned with sexually exploited children while they ignore the huge numbers of child laborers in every other field of activity in this city?"

During the Cup we helped conduct research into trafficking and sexual exploitation in the brothels and streets scenes of Rio.⁸ We didn't find any children selling sex. We did find hundreds—thousands, even—of little boys and girls selling beer, toting crates, hawking souvenirs and doing all sorts of Cup-related work at all hours of the day and night, often right under the very noses of the representatives

of the municipal and state child welfare councils who were supposedly “combating trafficking” but were apparently uninterested in any sort of coerced labor that didn’t involve sex. Why is this not talked about?

Because of the follow-up work by Davida and Transrevolução members and their allies,⁹ the anti-trafficking and child welfare organizations working with the Olympic Committee for Rio 2016 refocused much of their activities on other forms of labor exploitation during the Olympics. This attitude almost certainly helped to significantly diminish the number of child laborers encountered by researchers during the Games (Blanchette and DaSilva 2016).

In the federal sphere, Law 13.344 to combat human trafficking was passed in October 2016, bringing Brazil into harmony with the directives of the Palermo Protocol. This law was essentially the same as the bill which had been voted on by Davida representatives in the federal anti-trafficking committee. Although it is far from perfect, the sex worker, feminist, and trans organizations on the committee and their allies were able to prevent the new law from specifically defining sex workers as “trafficking victims”—a vast improvement on Brazil’s earlier law, Article 231 of the Penal Code, which had defined the migration of prostitutes as a necessary and sufficient component of human trafficking (da República 2016). The wide alliance of sex workers and allies forged by Gabriela, Cida and ourselves held until the very final moments of voting, when an allied congressional researcher, Maia Sprandel, ran down to the Senate and House of Representatives to successfully mobilize resistance against a last-minute attempt to substitute the bill passed by the anti-trafficking committee with a much more dangerous alternate.

6. Conclusions

The efforts of Davida’s leaders and their allies in the RBP and elsewhere to prevent Brazil’s new anti-trafficking law from becoming primarily a tool with which to beat prostitutes, were largely, if not completely, successful. The new law still contains loopholes which creative prosecutors and judges might employ to attack sex workers and, in particular, trans sex workers. It is certainly not what anyone would ask for, if there were a choice. It is, however, a significant improvement on Brazil’s earlier anti-trafficking law, which specifically and exclusively targeted non-coerced sex worker migration.

What can be highlighted in this success was the role academic researchers played in leveraging and potentializing both groups’ competencies and potentials in this struggle. Academics alerted Davida to the growing potential of the antitrafficking movement to derail sex workers’ political and cultural struggles for autonomy, human rights, and labor rights. Davida set those academics to watch over the anti-trafficking field, chart its growth, and confront its member agents and agencies about anti-sex worker moralisms masquerading as “agendas to aid the vulnerable”. In turn, academics alerted Davida to crucial moments when sex workers needed to mobilize a presence and resources in the anti-trafficking field and in the mediascape (Appadurai 1999) surrounding it. These combined efforts resulted in the positioning of the sex workers of Davida and the RBP as active voices at the policy making table in a political field that many sex workers quite correctly identified as not being of primary interest to their movement, but of importance in greater political and legal terms. Academics and sex workers, backing each other up and working together, were thus able to structurally influence the conditions of play in Brazil’s anti-trafficking field, at minimal cost to the sex workers’ movement.

This story should make us pause in our questions about representativity in structural interventions in sex work decriminalization and beyond. It indicates that while sex worker leadership and on-the-ground representativity is crucial for positive legislative outcomes, such engagement is powerfully potentialized by the types of multifaceted alliances with non-sex workers (and particularly academics), promoted by Gabriela Leite throughout her career as a sex worker leader in Brazil. It is precisely because alliances of these sort were forged and operationalized, that Brazil is one of the few countries today where official

anti-trafficking discourse almost always comes appended with the caveat that “not all sex work is human trafficking”.

Funding: This research required no funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ We use the word “prostitute” and “sex worker” interchangeably to refer to those who sell sexual services. It was Gabriela Leite’s preference to always use the term “prostitute” (when she wasn’t actively trying to destigmatize the word “whore” (puta)) to highlight the centrality of the sale of sex within the sex worker rights movement and to destigmatize sex work. In the present article, we follow her preference and that of the Brazilian Prostitutes’ Network (RBP).
- ² Sex work is currently recognized as a form of labor by Brazil’s labor laws but, given that it is completely unregulated, sex workers face almost insurmountable barriers to achieving labor rights such as health care and retirement. Although maintaining houses of prostitution is illegal in Brazil, there are thousands currently operating in the country—300+ in Rio de Janeiro alone. These “illegal” operations are generally run with covert police backing, often extracting more than 50% of the price of sex work from sex workers’ labor (Blanchette and DaSilva 2014). Among other things, the Gabriela Leite Bill restricts the level of this extraction to 50%, while defining sexual exploitation as exceeding this limit, forcing someone into sex work, or non-payment for consensual sexual services. Currently, the concept of “sexual exploitation” is undefined by Brazilian law, and its vagueness is often used, cynically and ironically, to force independent sex workers to operate under the control of police- and militia-backed third parties (Blanchette and DaSilva forthcoming).
- ³ Conversation with the author, September 2006.
- ⁴ We are not naming the specific agency, to protect their anonymity.
- ⁵ Same as note 3.
- ⁶ Gabriela had abandoned an incomplete sociology degree at the University in São Paulo in the 1970s, when she discovered that she preferred sex work to academia.
- ⁷ Although, in an ironic twist, I was the representative present at the committee’s final vote. Cida had prepared the way with alliances and cordiality: it became my job to try and ensure that no legal traps snuck past in the verbiage of the final round of voting.
- ⁸ Transrevolução had partnered with Davida and other organizations to monitor sex work during the Cup and to produce a post-event report (da Prostituição 2014).
- ⁹ Particularly Prostitution Policy Watch (da Prostituição 2014), which had been inaugurated 2012 as an extension program by Dr. Soraya Simões at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, in order to give qualified academic and research support to the RBP in the lead-up to and during the mega-sporting events of 2014 and 2016.

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