



# Intersectional LGBTQ identities and activism in Brazil

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*LGBT+ Liberation: LGBT+ lives and issues  
in the context of normativities*

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# Summary

In recent years, Brazilian LGBTQ movements have obtained rights typically considered the international standard of equality. However, queer people are still subjected to violence, intolerance, and a growing political opposition that led to the election of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. In this paper, I discuss preliminary findings from 52 interviews conducted with Brazilian LGBTQ activists from January to September 2021. Throughout the interviews, I explored how intersections of gender, class, race, and religion inform my participants' views on and experiences with identity, activism, strategies, and futurities. Here I focus on race, class and Christianity to discuss intersectional demands, belonging in the LGBTQ community, conflicting identities, and the need for intersectional solidarity going forward.

## Introduction

In recent years, Brazilian LGBTQ movements have obtained rights typically considered the international standard of equality (e.g., same-sex marriage, right to adoption, legal name change). Despite that, queer people are still subjected to discrimination, violence, and political backlash in all spheres. Moreover, since 2016, a conservative wave and the growing movement against 'gender ideology' in Latin America has cast doubts on the stability of the rights already achieved and their potential to guarantee full citizenship to all LGBTQ people.

Inequality in Brazil is strikingly high, a condition that became deeper since the 2020 coronavirus pandemic (Amaral, Jones, and Nogueira 2020). These inequalities have also been observed in the LGBTQ community and in the different ways queer people experience both discrimination and the achievements of the movement (Facchini and França 2009). It is then imperative to question how LGBTQ movements' strategies and ability to promote long-lasting results may reflect such inequalities. Thus, my research seeks to uncover how differences of gender, sexual identity, race, class, age, and religion, may differently affect the community's interaction with specific mechanisms in the course of political action. In that, I use intersectionality as an analytical tool that recognises that one's experiences of marginalisation and oppression are shaped by different categories that operate in constant interaction.

In this paper, I discuss preliminary findings from 52 interviews conducted with Brazilian LGBTQ activists from January to September 2021. Due to limitations imposed by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, all interviews were conducted online via Zoom, except for five in which I used Whatsapp Audio notes and two that happened through e-mail exchanges. Initial participants were contacted either through their organisations or, if found in relevant online events, through their personal social media. My sample was later expanded through snowballing. Among the 52 participants, I have interviewed:

- ➡ 50 men (23 cis, 4 trans, 2 gender fluid), 20 women (15 cis, 2 trans), and 2 non-binary people.
- ➡ 20 gays, 15 lesbians, 4 bisexuals or pansexuals, 2 heterosexuals, 1 demisexual, and 10 did not disclose.
- ➡ 28 participants declared themselves white, 14 black or pardo, and 10 did not disclose.

- 10 are Catholic, 6 Umbandistas, 2 Evangelicals, 1 Anglican, 1 Buddhist, 1 Spiritist (Kardecist), 4 are religious but did not specify, 16 participants do not have a religion, 11 did not declare a religion (or lack of).
- The youngest participant was 20 years old at the time of the interview and the oldest was 66. In total, 10 were 20–29 years old, 9 were 30–39, 12 were 40–49, 8 were 50–59, 4 were 60–66. Nine participants did not disclose their age.
- I interviewed people from all Brazilian regions across 25 different cities. The majority (16 participants) live in São Paulo-SP, although five of them were born in other places.

Themes such as inequalities and divergences within the community were common in most interviews. Here I focus on race, class and Christianity to discuss intersectional demands, belonging in the LGBTQ community, conflicting identities, and the need for intersectional solidarity going forward.

## The Brazilian LGBTQ movement

The first LGBTQ movements in Brazil emerged in the late 1970s, while the country was under a military dictatorship (1964–1985) which curtailed political mobilisation and persecuted activists (Green 1999; Simões and Facchini 2009; Trevisan 2004). The first movements focused on building a homosexual identity disassociated from ideas related to mental illness and criminality, on promoting sexual liberation, and on denouncing cases of violence, including state violence (Simões and Facchini 2009; Trevisan 2004). Since these first mobilisations differences have emerged among different groups that form the LGBTQ community, with lesbian and bisexual women soon finding the need to create their own movements (Fernandes 2014; Trevisan 2004).

However, in 1983 the still incipient Brazilian LGBTQ movement was confronted with its biggest hurdle so far, as the first cases of HIV/AIDS to be detected in the country. Confronted with state negligence and the increasing discrimination, movements were forced to direct their efforts towards the epidemic. In doing so, many groups became NGOs and going to the judiciary to pressure the government to act became a main strategy (Simões and Facchini 2009; Trevisan 2004). These strategies were very successful at the time, and Brazil's HIV/AIDS programme became internationally recognised as a role model (Galvão 2000; 2005). However, at the same time, they changed the format of the LGBTQ movement, which now started privileging an NGO-like form of organising. This led to professionalisation of activists, a focus on more technical issues and measurable goals rather than on broader ideas of liberation, and a decrease in political engagement (Facchini and França 2009; Galvão 2000).

In the 2000s, as the Working Party came to power, LGBTQ movements, as other social movements, found more opportunities to work closely with the government in issues beyond health, like education, labour, safety and culture. However, as the Congress was still not receptive of bills about LGBTQ rights, the judiciary remained as the main route for the movement to establish rights. In the past ten years judicial decisions, mostly by the Supreme Court, have established: gender reassignment procedures provided by the Public Healthcare System (2008), right to adoption by same-sex couples (2010), same-sex civil unions (2011), marriage equality (2013), legal recognition of gender identity without judicial or medical approval (2018), criminalisation of LGBTQphobia in the same terms of laws against

racial discrimination (2019), and the end of restrictions for blood donation from men who have sex with men (2020).

There is no denying the importance of such achievements, but these rights are not without shortcomings. For example, in the Brazilian legal system, rights established by the judiciary do not offer the same legal security as those that come from the legislature and can be more easily overturned. Also, these rights have not been properly regulated, leading to irregular implementation. Further, the discussions leading up to these decisions happened within a limited scope while broader cisheteronormative structures within the state and society in general remained unchallenged. Importantly, Brazil still records high levels of violence against LGBTQ people, especially against trans people and travestis<sup>1</sup> of colour (Benevides 2022). Lastly, right-wing politicians and groups have been able to successfully mobilise opposition to LGBTQ people in the country (Melo 2020). For instance, Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 presidential campaign heavily relied on moral panic against what has been called 'gender ideology', which is a broad concept that includes anything that is loosely related to gender and sexuality and goes against conservative values and 'threatens' the traditional cisheteronormative family (Corredor 2019).

This amounts to a scenario in which many LGBTQ people are still vulnerable and marginalised and do not have access to the newly gained specific rights, full citizenship, or even basic resources. Their situation is further exacerbated by an intersection of inequalities.

## Race and class

In many interviews, participants discussed intersectionality as a central challenge to the movement since its inception. For many of them, intersectionality has been a much-discussed topic yet to be put in practice. Some commented that, because of the difficulties faced by marginalised voices within the wider movement many new segmented groups had to be created, but this made the wider movement too fragmented. Thus, marginalised groups cannot count on the political power of a unified LGBTQ community when advancing their causes. Many believe that it is necessary to discuss certain issues among specific subgroups, with the movement then coming together as one to advance such issues and lend their political weight to these specific causes.

While race and class are different categories, their intersection in participants' accounts of their experiences makes it impossible to speak about them separately. The different issues faced by those outside the white middle-class were even present when I was arranging interviews with participants. Some potential participants who I approached showed interest in contributing to my research but had difficulty finding free time to speak with me, between work, family responsibilities, activism, and new responsibilities imposed by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, which included distributing food and hygiene products to the most vulnerable within the LGBTQ community (Santos Barreto 2020). Further, those who live in favelas, poor neighbourhoods, or smaller towns also dealt with connectivity issues, that made their participation impossible or interrupted our conversation many times. Two participants in such circumstances had to switch from Zoom to WhatsApp Audio Notes, as their internet connection could not support the programme.

Furthermore, other specific issues that illustrate inequality in the country arose. For instance, Michele Seixas, a black lesbian woman from Rio de Janeiro, not only had to deal with a spotty internet connection, but on the day of the interview an illegal police raid in Complexo do

Alemão, where she lives, had led to hours of shooting. When I asked her if she would rather rearrange the interview, Michele said that it was better to take advantage of the momentary calmness. Another participant, José Roberto Paes, a pardo gay man living in Belém of Pará, had to reschedule his interview because he was busy trying to find public hospitals with available ICU beds for friends infected with COVID-19.

Crucially, this current situation has affected people's activism and visibility in a time when online events became the main tool for activists to engage with the community, provide training, push forward their demands, protest, and even to enjoy their social lives. Janaina Oliveira, a black lesbian woman, commented on how the online environment can be exclusionary:

*'Everyone talks about this great virtual era, online events and whatever, and we have a big limitation, because most of our comrades are unemployed, they don't have wi-fi at home, and (...) with the pandemic you don't have an alternative to go to another place to access the internet, get into a zoom chat and actively participate in an activity.'*

Another important aspect brought up in interviews was that many people still find hurdles in accessing rights guaranteed by the Supreme Court. João Marcon, who acts in Curitiba's Grupo Dignidade giving legal advice to the community, told me that most of cases they receive are from trans people who had their requests for name and gender change unlawfully denied. In his interview, Bruno Camargo, a black gay man from a small coastal town in the state of São Paulo, also highlighted this issue. One of his friends, a trans woman, was denied the change in her documents and did not have the resources to challenge the hurdles imposed. Consequentially she could not open a bank account which further derailed her financial life and plans. Their town does not have organisations set-up to help LGBTQ people with legal matters, hence she did not know how to proceed without paying for a lawyer. Bruno and some friends from the local LGBTQ community got together and eventually found people who could help her sort out the documentation and navigate the Brazilian bureaucracy pro bono.

Many of my participants from marginalised communities told me they feel that the white middle-class segment of the movement does not show enough awareness of the difficulties that are present even after rights are achieved and which issues are a priority for most of the community. Elvis Justino, a black gay man who is part of Família Stronger, a LGBTQ 'family' from the periphery of the city of São Paulo, expressed how inequalities are present within the movement when he said:

*'While they [white middle-class] are fighting for the right to hire surrogates, in the periphery we are fighting to have a house, to stay alive. When you look at the data, we are the ones dying. (...) The inequality in Brazil is also in the LGBT [community], and this is very hard.'*

Gabriel Van, a black trans man, talked with me about having to learn already as an adult how to navigate life as a Black man in the periphery of Rio de Janeiro and how hard it can be to find support in this process. He told me about a particular incident in which the police stopped him and investigated his wallet. All his documents and credit card still had his dead name<sup>3</sup>, thus the police accused him of stealing them. This experienced was made worse by the specific treatment of black man by the police in Rio de Janeiro. They did not simply take him to a police station to clarify the situation, they physically assaulted him. Later, he talked about this experience in a support group where he is the only black man. Of course, all his

peers were supportive, but were unable to offer any kind of advice, as they have never been in this kind of situation. As Gabriel commented: ‘No one is going to question that a white man is carrying their mother’s or girlfriend’s credit card. They wouldn’t even ask whose card is that. But, of course, they questioned me.’

Nathan Victoriano, another black trans man, also talked about the difficulties with discussing his specific experiences as a black trans man within the communities he inhabits:

*‘As a black trans guy in the black movement, there is not much space to talk about gender, and in the trans movement I don’t find that much space to talk about race. (...) It’s as if I must talk about a part here and another there and can never put them together. I can only talk about these issues when I have an opportunity to speak freely, to choose the topic, or when I participate in a research, something very specific. So, it’s complicated. I think we are advancing very slowly in that regard.’*

It is therefore clear that attempts to extend inclusion to the wider LGBTQ movement are still being frustrated. While many segmented groups have been trying to address such issues, the general movement is slow to dismantle the unequal power structures. If we are to achieve liberation, we cannot shy away from such difficult but necessary conversations.

## Christianity

Current political opposition to LGBTQ rights in Brazil has been mostly based around the concept of ‘gender ideology’, a concept that has been promoted by many Christian religious leaderships, including the Vatican. It is then not surprising that Christianity appeared as a topic in most interviews, although only 13 of the 52 participants declared themselves as Christians. Many interviewees told me about the hardships of growing up being told and believing themselves that they were sinners or that they would always have to hide an important aspect of their lives to be accepted by their communities. Many of the interviewees were ex-Christians who either found more accepting religious communities elsewhere or gave up on spirituality altogether – a process often described as painful. A few try to take the best out of Christianity while ignoring the parts that are hurtful by not disclosing their sexuality to their friends from church.

Those that I classify here as LGBTQ Christian activists are six of the ten Catholics and one of the two Evangelicals who make Christianity part of their activism and participate in groups for this specific segment. Embodying this dual identity, that for many seems to be a contradiction, has multiple implications for Christian LGBTQ people’s activism and at a deep personal level. However, most of the current LGBTQ Christian activists I interviewed described meeting other LGBTQ Christians and being able to live their faith without secrets as almost a rebirth, an opportunity to enjoy another kind of Christianity, and for many of them it had tangible positive effects on their lives.

For instance, Cris Serra, a Catholic lesbian who is part of Diversidade Católica (Catholic Diversity), told me that at 18 years old she struggled with the implications of her sexuality for her faith. After some time, she came to accept that she was Catholic and lesbian and believed that if these two identities were lived separately everything would be fine. Around ten years later, a friend told her about a Catholic LGBTQ group. Cris, although a bit sceptical, went to the meeting which included a mass. It was the first time she had a religious experience without the need to hide her sexuality. She was overcome with emotion, stating:

*'That day I understood the gravity of the violence that it was, that every time I entered into a church, I left a part of me outside'.*

Another participant, Bob Botelho, a gay Evangelical pastor, at the age of 19 was travelling the country to preach and consolidating his career as an Evangelical pastor, while keeping in secret a relationship with another man. After a messy break-up, his internal conflict between his identity and religion led him to a severe depressive episode. At this point, he asked to be seen only by Evangelical professionals, as in his own words 'he didn't want anyone to tell him that he could be gay, he wanted to be cured'. However, he was lucky enough to be seen by ethical professionals, who helped him accept and understand his sexuality. In this process of self-acceptance, Bob also found support from his then sister-in-law, who was a feminist theologian, and from people he met on the internet through his blog. From there, he started reading about other possible Christian experiences with sexuality and found an inclusive church.

My participants also revealed that the position of LGBTQ Christians within the non-Christian LGBTQ community can be precarious: they are often met with suspicion, and many do not feel welcomed. It was very clear from the interviews that for many non-Christian activists, Christianity is obviously an enemy, and an absurd choice of religion for LGBTQ people. Cris Serra told me about an online interaction in which she was told that 'being Catholic and LGBT is like being a Jewish Nazi'. Another participant, Felipe<sup>2</sup>, a Catholic gay man who coordinates a group in the North of Brazil, told me that his group organised workshops to teach its members about LGBTQ history, different identities and even slang terms, as many of them grew up in the Church and now have some trouble socialising and participating in general queer culture.

Further, Bob Botelho, told me that his organisation Evangelicxs, has trouble accessing funding for their projects. He believes that this is due to people's wariness about working with an Evangelical group given the strong opposition of mainstream Evangelical Churches in the country to LGBTQ rights. Bob says that there is a fear that they may be a conversion therapy group in disguise, that they share some of the discriminatory values of fundamentalist Evangelicals (e.g., attacks on Afro-Brazilian religions by Evangelicals are common in the country), or that they will try to convert people. However, the mission of the Evangelicxs is to evangelise the Evangelical Church towards a Jesus that is radically inclusive and affirmative of their sexualities. Bob and other participants reported that Christian LGBTQ groups often assist evangelical pastors and catholic priests who are part of non-inclusive churches but want to provide better pastoral care to LGBTQ members of their congregations, without alerting central authorities. Also, they often support Christian families of LGBTQ people. Although some families at first come to them looking for conversion therapy for their relatives, after meeting and interacting with Christians LGBTQ people, many end up moving towards love and acceptance.

On a macro-level, there is in Brazil and beyond a growing movement towards queer and feminist theologies, that work to offer counter-narratives to 'anti-gender ideology' groups. As Bob Botelho commented: 'Every time someone says that Jesus or Christianity rejects

LGBTs, Evangelicxs appears as an alternative experience of Christian faith'. However, as commented above, they find resistance from those that believe that Christianity is immutable and will always reject queer people. While the interviewees generally agreed that the wider LGBTQ community's rejection of them was rooted in understandable fears and traumatic experiences, they regretted that important opportunities to engage with religious opposition on common ground are being missed by non-Christian LGBTQ groups. Further, this

static view of religious [and other] institutions is seen by these Christian activists as a barrier to imagining different futures. It leads instead to the upholding of notions of 'tradition' that not only justify LGBTQphobia through religious narratives, but also limit people's ability to envision the abolishment of oppressive structures. As Cris Serra pointed out that is something that Christian LGBTQ activists are challenging in their activism:

*'We need a utopia that gives us a vision, a goal of where we are moving to, in which ways we want to transform this world that we live in. Otherwise, we are reduced to simply surviving however possible and it really isn't possible in a terrible world that was always this way and will always be this way.'*

Christian LGBTQ activists show us that another kind of Christian experience is not only possible but already exists. A Christian experience based on a form of queer radical hope, the pure belief that there is a God that does not only tolerate queer people but affirms their queerness. And at a time when the opposition to LGBTQ rights is strong and grounded in a narrow reading of Christianity, their activism can be truly transformative both in helping other people with self-acceptance and in achieving wider transformations.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I presented two dimensions of the diversity that exists within the Brazilian LGBTQ movements that, although rather different, represent the urgent need to put intersectionality in practice. Both cases show that the incorporation of different voices can add to the wider movement's repertoire of strategies but also that it is necessary to guarantee that results are implemented in a way that benefit those in the most marginalised within the community.

While Brazil has made incredible advances in terms of rights in the last 10 years, those most marginalised by class and racial inequalities are yet to fully experience such results. Further, many still deal with urgent needs related to housing, food security and health that are exacerbated by their position in society as LGBTQ people. However, class and race still tend to be viewed as separate from gender and sexuality issues. Organisations such as Elvis Justino's Família Stronger already work towards dismantling oppression in these intersections. It is now time for the most privileged within the community to also support intersectional practices.

Equally, the experience of LGBTQ Christians shows a segment of the community for whom the journey of self-acceptance has often been further derailed by years of intimate struggle with the same oppressive discourses that are now commonplace in Brazilian politics. If embodying two apparently conflicting identities means they struggle to fit into their communities, it also gives them unique insights and tools to confront those that oppose their existence.

While differences and disagreements are to be expected in a movement that encompasses many identities, groups, and collectives, the political power of the LGBTQ movement comes from their union. It is very clear that many LGBTQ people are conscious of the need to incorporate intersectional lenses in their activism and are willing to do so, not only as a matter of fairness but to develop better tools to achieve true liberation. However, this will only be achieved by addressing inequalities within the movement and re-evaluating preconceived notions.

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