

## Fighting for dignified survival: the imprisonment of LGBTQI+ in Brazil – an autobiographical account

Luiz Carlos de Oliveira,  
Renan Araujo, and Amanda Cavalcante\*

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### Introduction

The Brazilian penitentiary system is nearing collapse.<sup>1</sup> With 714,899 prisoners (the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest prison population in the world by number of prisoners) and only space for 418,895, it is terrifically overcrowded with an occupancy level of 167.6%.<sup>2</sup> Conditions are precarious and imprisonment is the rule for the most common criminal offences. More than one-third of the inmates in Brazil's penitentiaries are pre-trial detainees and are kept alongside convicted ones. This situation led the Brazilian Supreme Court to declare an 'unconstitutional state of affairs' in 2015, a legal ruling that acknowledges the failure of both the legislative and executive branches of government to enforce public policies against widespread and systemic violations of fundamental rights.<sup>3</sup> Since then, despite the implementation of some measures, such as the custody hearing,<sup>4</sup> no meaningful reduction in the prison population's growth has taken place.

The overcrowded prisons are kept in a fragile state of 'peace' solely due to the power structures established by the prisoners themselves. Inside Brazilian prisons, a rigid hierarchy is enforced by the most powerful inmates, with the endorsement of the prison staff. Without this self-control, the small number of prison officers would not be

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\* This essay is based on an interview given by Luiz as member of the *Além das Grades* (Beyond Bars) group about his story. *Além das Grades* is a human rights collective formed by Law students and professionals that provides free legal aid to prisoners and organizes events about human rights in Pernambuco, Brazil. More information, in Portuguese, is available at: [www.alemdasgrades.org](http://www.alemdasgrades.org) or, in English, at [grupoalemdasgrades@gmail.com](mailto:grupoalemdasgrades@gmail.com). Renan Araújo ([r.n.araujo@lse.ac.uk](mailto:r.n.araujo@lse.ac.uk)) translated the information from Portuguese, composed the text and wrote the introduction and footnotes. Amanda Cavalcante ([aamandacavalcante@gmail.com](mailto:aamandacavalcante@gmail.com)) transcribed the interview and gathered information from Luiz.

<sup>1</sup> More about Brazil's human rights scenario is available at Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2019* at : <<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/brazil#709451>> accessed 21 August 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See World Prison Brief, Brazil 2019 (Institute for Criminal Policy Research) <<http://www.prisonstudies.org/country/brazil>> accessed August 21 2019. The most comprehensive official source on the Brazilian prison system is the 'Infopen,' a report by the National Penitentiary Department. See the 2016 report, in Portuguese: Ministério da Justiça Pública Departamento Penitenciário Nacional, *Levantamento Nacional De Informações Penitenciárias* (2016) available at [http://depen.gov.br/DEPEN/depen/sisdepen/infopen/relatorio\\_2016\\_22-11.pdf](http://depen.gov.br/DEPEN/depen/sisdepen/infopen/relatorio_2016_22-11.pdf) accessed 21 August 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Thiago Sombra 'ADPF 347 and the "Unconstitutional State of Affairs" of Brazil's Prison System' (2016) 17(2) Espaço Jurídico Journal of Law.

<sup>4</sup> A custody hearing is a hearing with a judge, a prosecutor and a public defender to which an imprisoned person must be taken within 24 hours of arrest. It aims to prevent unnecessary imprisonment and police abuse. Custody hearings were established by the Resolution No. 213/2015 of the National Council of Justice.

able to govern the prisons: on average, there are nine prisoners for each prison officer in Brazil. In the state of Pernambuco, where this autobiographical account takes place, there are 20 inmates for each guard – the worst ratio in the country.<sup>5</sup>

This essay is an autobiographical account by Luiz, a gay man who was a pre-trial detainee in Recife, Pernambuco. Besides his own experience, he shared with us his analysis of the prison hierarchy. He described it as a centralized division of power and told us details about its structure.<sup>6</sup>

The highest position a prisoner can exert in a cell block is that of ‘keyholder.’ Originally, the keyholder was an inmate whom the prison staff trusted with the keys of the cell block due to his leadership and influence. Nowadays, keyholders have much more power: they are responsible for creating the rules of the cell block and enforcing them. This ‘informal’ power is legitimised by the prison staff. Keyholders are paid as workers by the prison and have the times they serve reduced. They communicate constantly with the prison officers, especially via cell phone and message apps such as WhatsApp, to update them about the conditions of their block. Although illegal according to the Penal Execution Law, keeping a phone is a benefit for the ones who have power or can afford it.

Keyholders enforce their command through ‘cats’, a troop of prisoners who exert physical power over the others. Cats are allowed to carry weapons such as knives, steel plates, sickles, and guns. Theoretically, cats are responsible for the security of the inmates, preventing fights and disagreements from escalating. However, as Luiz described, they are actually the ones responsible for most aggressions and abuses – always under the keyholder’s command.

Besides the keyholder, there are also other leadership positions. There is usually a keyholder’s assistant who enforces the rules in the keyholder’s absence – for example when there are meetings with the prison staff or a hearing that the keyholder must attend or simply when the keyholder is sleeping. If the two of them get along well, they may even share leadership duties.

The third most important position is the ‘messenger’ or ‘pollster,’ who reports to the keyholder’s assistant. The messenger is responsible for the entrance, exit, and transfer of prisoners in the block. He registers each inmate and keeps a count of them. According to Luiz, even the official count of prisoners in the entire unit depends on these messengers. They are essential to prevent escapes, unordered transfers, and other unwanted changes. Luiz sees their role as crucial: the more organized the cell block is, the less the prison officers will need to enter it. The prisoners do their best to keep the officers out of the cells as they take away everything that is illegal, such as weapons and cell phones, when they enter the blocks.

Another position is the health agent, a prisoner who connects inmates to the health staff. There may be one or two per block. They make appointments with doctors, take medicines to the block and are helpful to prisoners with sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS, who do not want to expose themselves taking medicines in

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<sup>5</sup> Monitor da Violência [“Violence Monitor”], G1 and the Center for the Study of Violence from the University of São Paulo (NEV-USP) <<https://g1.globo.com/monitor-da-violencia/noticia/brasil-tem-media-de-7-presos-por-agente-penitenciario-19-estados-descumprem-limite-recomendado.ghtml>> accessed 23 August 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Similar information was gathered by Human Rights Watch, César Muñoz: Forty Percent of Detainees Awaiting Trial (Dec 8 2017) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/08/prison-conditions-worsen-brazil>> accessed 21 August 2019.

public. Despite their relative freedom of transit, they are not paid and do not exert power over the other inmates. For this reason, not many prisoners want to work as health agents.

This precarious situation of control, based on the exertion of physical power and constant violence among the inmates, is alarming. It affects all prisoners but is especially concerning for the LGBTQI+ imprisoned community. Homophobia is the rule among inmates and its most serious consequences include collective raping, beating and forced work.<sup>7</sup> Usual abuses include prostitution, social isolation and being forced to work in positions considered subordinate or 'female', such as cleaning and cooking for the other prisoners.

The Joint Resolution nº 1/2014 from the National Council of Penitentiary and Criminal Policy<sup>8</sup> provides basic rights for imprisoned LGBTQI+, such as separated cells and marital visits with same-sex partners. However, many prisons still do not implement these rights, be it for the lack of facilities, lack of staff or pure prejudice.

The prison where Luiz spent most of his time – the Prison Judge Antonio Luiz Lins de Barros (PJALLB), in the Curado Prison Complex – is widely considered one of the worst in Latin America. It was investigated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which ruled in 2015 that no new detainees should be sent there until its inhumane conditions were improved<sup>9</sup> – but the government kept allocating new inmates to it. Human Rights Watch described prisons in Pernambuco in a report from 2015:

Brazil's prisons are a human-rights disaster. Detainees—even those who have not been convicted of a crime—are routinely held in overcrowded, violent, and disease-ridden cells. Overcrowding in the prisons of the northeastern state of Pernambuco is especially dire. The prisons hold more than three times as many inmates as their official capacity in conditions that are dangerous, unhealthy, and inhumane.

During visits to Pernambuco's prisons in 2015, a researcher from Human Rights Watch entered a windowless cell without beds, in which 37 men slept on sheets on the floor. Another, which had six cement bunks for 60 men, lacked even enough floor space. A tangle of makeshift hammocks made it difficult to cross the room, and one man was sleeping sitting up, tying himself to the bars of the door so that he wouldn't slump over onto other men. In that cell, the stench of sweat, feces, and mold was overpowering.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> More about the practice of collective raping in Brazilian prisons has been documented by Human Rights Watch, see Amy Braunschweiger, 'Witness: The Horrors of Brazil's Prisons – Jorge's Story' (Oct 15 2015) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/10/19/witness-horrors-brazils-prisons-jorges-story>> accessed 21 August 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Resolução Conjunta No. 1 de 15 Abril de 2014 <[http://www.lex.com.br/legis\\_25437433\\_RESOLUCAO\\_CONJUNTA\\_N\\_1\\_DE\\_15\\_DE\\_ABRIL\\_DE\\_2014.aspx](http://www.lex.com.br/legis_25437433_RESOLUCAO_CONJUNTA_N_1_DE_15_DE_ABRIL_DE_2014.aspx)> accessed 21 August 2019.

<sup>9</sup> IACHR Resolution from Oct 10 2015, establishing provisional measures for Brazil regarding the Curado Prison Complex, <[http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/medidas/curado\\_se\\_02\\_por.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/medidas/curado_se_02_por.pdf)>. The most recent IACHR Resolution about the subject, from Nov 28 2018, is available at <[http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/medidas/curado\\_se\\_06\\_por.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/medidas/curado_se_06_por.pdf)>, both accessed 27 August 2019. More information on conditions in the prison can be found at César Muñoz Acebes 'Brazil's Correctional Houses of Horror: Recent Mass Killings Show the Need for Reform' *Foreign Affairs*, (Jan 18 2019) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/brazil/2017-01-18/brazil-s-correctional-houses-horror>, Fabiola Ortiz, 'Maior cadeia do Brasil tem favela e área "Minha cela, minha vida" para presos VIP' BBC New Brasil (June 11 2016) <<https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brazil-36496295>> accessed 21 August 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Human Right Watch, 'The State Let Evil Take Over: The Prison Crisis in the Brazilian State of Pernambuco' (Oct 19 2015) available at (accessed Aug 21 2019).



Figure 1. Inside Complexo do Curado. Pictures taken by a judge during an inspection by the National Council of Justice (CNJ) in 2014. Source: José Braga Neto/CNJ, 2014.

Besides these violations, Brazil's prison system also lacks consistent data collection. The comprehensive Infopen, a periodic report by the National Penitentiary Department with all Brazilian prisons, lacks data from several units that did not answer the survey. When it comes to specific data, such as about the LGBTQI+ community, it is even more precarious. Prisons do not collect this kind of information and the last Infopen, from 2016, does not even mention the LGBTQI+.<sup>11</sup>

This is why accounts such as Luiz's are especially important. Raising awareness about the specific violations suffered by the LGBTQI+ community in Brazilian prisons is crucial to develop policies and change their situation for the better. It is time to give a voice and listen to the unheard.

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<sup>11</sup> See Infopen (n 2).

## Luiz' Story

### 1. Centre for Criminological Observation: first days in prison

One day, I was living my ordinary life. The next, I was sent to the Centre for Criminological Observation and Screening Professor Everardo Luna (COTEL), an overcrowded prison in Pernambuco, Brazil. I had never had a similar experience. I had been on the other side, helping imprisoned people in social programs as a human rights activist. But I would have never expected to live the situation myself.

First, I went through screening. I was shocked by how they stereotyped me: I was repeatedly told that I was gay, black and did not have higher education. They especially repeated questions to confirm my homosexuality. As this is not a problem for me, I simply reaffirmed it. After a couple of hours waiting in the screening cell, the guards began to call us out to our new cell blocks. I was very scared, ignorant of what would become of me. During this process, some of the other prisoners told me that – since I was a ‘faggot’ – I was going to stay in the screening cell, separated from the ordinary inmates. Gay men do not get along with others in the system, they told me. I felt relieved to be separated. This guaranteed me I would not be abused or punished due to my sexuality. However, I soon found out what this separation would cost me. I had to pay the guards, was stripped out of my clothes and kept naked alongside the other prisoners for hours. In the evening, the guards called me again. I was going to be taken to a cell block anyway. They gave me a paper with my full name, my number in the Brazilian penitentiary system and my designated block. At the entrance gate, someone shouted my full name. I was even more scared. Every single moment I thought I was going to die. Many shouted threats, making me even more frightened. I looked at the gate of the block and there was a young black officer calling me. He reprimanded me because I did not respond quickly enough. And again I ran down to another gate with the guard. As I arrived at my designated cell, a man identified as Gringo (a slang term for foreigner), who was the keyholder, asked me who sent me there. He asked me if I wanted to give him the trouble of picking up the pieces of my body there. I was terrified. He asked: aren't you a girl? I answered, scared to my bones: I am homosexual. At that moment, an officer saw Gringo shouting and took me out of the cell.

Homicides are common in the cell blocks: prisoners kill each other and the bodies of the victims are put in trash bins to demonstrate that they are rubbish. Many things can motivate a killing – a debt, a fight or simply prejudice, especially homophobia. The officer took me to a room and asked if I had said I was gay. He was trying to blame me for going to the cell, even though I had been taken there by the Prison officers. He told me that I should not have gone there and sent me back to the screening cell.

A few minutes later they called me again and changed my cell block. I was sent to Cell 3, a punishment cell with worse conditions. Those who are being punished for misconduct or cannot have contact with other inmates, due to the risk of being killed, are sent there. And since they did not have room for LGBTQI+ prisoners, we are also placed in that cell. Luckily, the keyholder of the cell was also gay and provided me with a place to sleep.

In the cell, there was space for about 7 men, but there were more than 50. Many could not lie down with their backs completely on the floor, so they laid on their sides. If the cell leaders decided to punish someone, they either laid around the toilet or had to stand.



Figure 2. Source: José Braga Neto/CNJ, 2014.

As Cell 3 is a punishment cell, several angry inmates were sent there. Depending on what had happened in their original cells, when they arrived in Cell 3, they might be physically punished by the prisoners. The penitentiary system itself does not control the inmates: they command themselves. Whenever the cell leaders decided, they formed circles, threw the victim in the middle and that person would be beaten. Depending on the reaction of the victim, they could call more people to beat them or look for objects, such as iron bars, to beat them more heavily. During these beatings, I had to lean against the wall and simply watch. I could not help the victim in the middle of the circle, so I just shrunk to the corner and did my best not to bring attention to myself in order to avoid being called to take part in the beating. If I closed my eyes or showed reluctance in any way if called, I could also be sent into the circle.

I arrived in the prison on a Saturday. On Sunday, my mother and sister were allowed to visit me. My family had a hard time finding which cell I was in, though. The officers only remembered where I was when my family told them I was gay. We were given 20 minutes to talk. We chatted, prayed and hugged each other. After the visit, everything changed. When I returned to the cell a turmoil began. The inmates considered I was privileged to be visited by my family, as many of them were not visited or did not even have a family. They demanded my 'benefits' be taken away. They changed the space where I slept to the corner of the wall. The mat I slept on was taken, as well as the few sheets and blankets I had. They took the food my family gave me.

I tried to fortify my mind to resist these aggressions. If I was supposed to sleep in the corner, at least it would give my body extra protection against possible abuses. If I was supposed to give my food away, at least I could still eat what others received as well. Food sharing was a practice from which inmates were rarely excluded. The food provided by the prison was not enough (often it was only old bread and water or coffee), so anyone who received food should share it with everyone in the cell.

Later that day, the officers called me to cut my hair. At that time, I had big hair because I had planned to put dreads in. Another gay man told me I was not obliged to cut my hair if it was not my desire. Human rights guaranteed my freedom of choice, he told me. However, I found myself in a situation where I was not able to take care of my hygiene and had my belongings taken away from me. I had no choice. They cut my hair without a comb, using the same clippers for everybody without any cleanliness. A random cut just for the purpose of taking out my hair.

With my hair cut, I went back to the cell. It was time for the collective 'meal,' which consisted of a cup of coffee and a loaf of bread per person. It was 4 p.m. and the next 'meal' would only be at 5 a.m. the next day. The shared food of the inmates was what saved us from hunger. During the meal, one of the inmates told me what he considered the most important rule of the cell: I should not be 'naughty.' Even if I liked the 'naughtiness,' that was not the moment or place for that. Although vague, I understood he was referring to the fact that I am homosexual. He intended to make it clear to me that I should not flirt with anyone there. Obviously, this was a thought that never crossed my mind.

In these first days, I tried to befriend my cellmates and join their activities. They had a math game which I liked watching it, seeing how smart they were. As days passed, they started letting me take part in the game. Not even the oldest homosexual in the cell participated. However, I began to realise that they had second intentions. They aimed at my sister.

They asked me to offer her in exchange for personal protection. They started intimidating me, telling me that only if I gave my sister's phone number could I stay in that cell. That shook me deeply. I had never seen my sister in that way but at that moment I saw her with the eyes of these people: as a commodity.

I could not distance myself from these people because they were the leaders of the cell. Afterward, I learnt that another gay inmate in the cell, called Spider (due to the way he climbed buildings to commit robberies), was spying on me and informing the leaders about my family, what they had brought me and what I liked or disliked. I spent days suffering without knowing what to do, fearing to make any movement. Little did I know, but during this time my mother was doing her best to get me transferred to another prison. She told her friends about my danger and found out that the mother of one of them worked in the Curado Prison Complex. My mother talked to her and argued that I was endangered in COTEL as gay men were not separated from other inmates. On Tuesday, my fourth day in COTEL, I was finally transferred.

## **2. The survival of a LGBTQI+ is against the prison rules**

I was transferred to a prison 26km away from COTEL: the Prison Judge Antonio Luiz Lins de Barros (PJALLB), in the Curado Prison Complex. As I was the only one arriving on the Tuesday, I waited for my sorting (which cell block I would be sent to) in a separated cell alongside two rapists – the security needed to separate them from the other inmates due to the risk of aggression against them. While I was waiting there, the other inmates thought that, due to my sexuality, I was a rapist too. I heard all kinds of threats from the prisoners' screams. They told me they would stick an iron bar through



Figure 3. The door of Luiz's "privileged" space in the Curado Prison Complex. Source: anonymous inmate, 2017.

my anus until it came out through my mouth. When I finally arrived in my designated cell, one of the inmates searched me to see what I was carrying. He took everything I had – not much, after my passage through the last prison. Among these possessions, I carried my report card from the police department, which contained my identification and the reason for my imprisonment. He read my charge aloud for the other prisoners to hear: article 157, armed robbery. Then they let me sit. I was not a rapist, but a thief – as most of them were. I was gay but was one of them.

In that cell, to my surprise, I met people from my neighbourhood. They 'rescued' me – that is, they used their influence to protect me, as one of them was a keyholder. They contacted security and asked them to switch me from my block to another where

there were more LGBTQI+ people. Despite their benevolence, I had heard at COTEL that there was excessive drug abuse in that block, especially crack cocaine. For that reason, it was extremely violent. I shared my concerns with these friendly inmates, and they arranged my transfer to a different block. It was a small space with only three prisoners.



Figure 4. Source: José Braga Neto/CNJ, 2014

This was a 'privileged' space, where a weekly rent should be paid to the keyholder (about \$40 to \$50 US dollars). There was a refrigerator, a stove and a television. Despite this better physical structure, it was still a precarious situation; with amateurly constructed brick walls and an incredibly low ceiling (see figures). It was considered 'privileged' because the ones who could not afford it or were not rescued by someone stayed on in a place called 'the road:' a space between the cells where they slept on the bare floor. They could not even lie down completely but were forced to lie on their sides.



Figure 5. Inside Luiz's "privileged" space. Source: anonymous inmate, 2017.

had had some jobs related to health, I began to develop some projects with them. Many HIV-positive prisoners did not get treatment due to the fear of being humiliated or beaten. I took medication and condoms to the cells and gave it to the prisoners. I even managed to get boxes of lubricants. As the condoms provided by the government were very dry, the lubricant improved the sexual relations a lot, besides preventing the condoms from bursting or ripping.

At first, I did not leave the cell. I kept writing and reflecting on what was happening to me at that moment. I could only hear the noise of people passing. The ones who rescued me advised me not to leave the cell and be quiet. They said I was not respected and could be killed due to my sexuality. I was a gay man living in a 'privileged' cell with three straight inmates and this was not 'allowed' by the big bosses of the prison. My dignified survival broke their rules.

A common role for LGBTQI+ prisoners is to provide 'women's' services, such as cleaning. Many would invite the LGBTQI+ men to clean their cells and then rape them. This subordination was the *status quo* that I did not follow.

It took me three months to leave the cell but when I did it was liberating. I registered for the university entrance national exam (ENEM) and started visiting the small library, which I had not even known existed<sup>12</sup>. I began to watch talks at the church and attend school every evening to study for the exam. I started interacting with other people: the psychologist, the teacher, the health workers. Since I

<sup>12</sup> A video about the library can be found at 'Programa incentiva presos a ler para ter redução da pena no Recife' available at <https://globoplay.globo.com/v/5943916>. Luiz speaks at 2min50sec. Accessed 21 August 2019.

After a couple of months, a social worker was assigned to work specifically with the LGBTQI+ population. During my time, about 32 men identified themselves as LGBTQI+ (among thousands). As I was a 'more masculine' LGBTQI+, I could transit in the prison without suffering violence – the inmates threw buckets of water, piss, and stones at those who were 'more feminine'. I had to grow a "dirtier" look, with big beard and hair, not to arouse interest in others.

As time passed, my survival increasingly bothered the inmates. I was a gay man who lived in a 'privileged' space, had some influence with the prison health staff and received visits from my partner. They did not like it at all. As I transited through the blocks to give notice - about new projects, the inmates started to frown upon me. I was happy to develop such projects but started to suffer consequences. Some days, when I was sleeping, an inmate would crawl over me and masturbate on me. Once when I woke up and asked what was happening, he asked me to perform oral sex on him.



*Figure 6. A corridor between cell blocks. Source: anonymous inmate, 2017.*

It was a very tiring time. I started working at the refectory and woke up at 4 a.m. to prepare the food for the prisoners' breakfast. I earned \$130 US dollars a month for this job, besides the right to live in a different block. After my shift, I worked on a reading project with a new social worker.

As I became more independent, I decided to request my transfer to a different block in order to live in a cell alone. However, the friendly keyholder who had rescued me gave me a warning: if I went to a cell to be by myself, he would not be able to protect me anymore. Despite the risk, I could not handle the situation anymore. Not only was I suffering aggressions, but I made my cellmates suffer as well. They were constantly mocked because they lived alongside a gay person.

Everything was arranged for my transfer. However, in the meeting with the security team, I received bad news. They had not received the necessary authorization. It would be too dangerous, as I would not have any protection, and the prison direction would not allow it. They considered I would be safer in the cell I was in.

### 3. Turning words into actions

The hostility the inmates felt towards me just grew as days passed. I could see it routinely in their faces and feel it in their words. And then, one night, they finally decided to turn their words into actions.

I vividly remember the Saturday night when they pulled me by the leg and took me to the keyholder. They told him I was having sexual intercourse in the cell. He slapped me. A corridor of 30 men was formed to spank me. During the whole night, I was tortured. As I was under the effect of anxiolytics to sleep, I did not completely understand what was going on. The kicks and punches left external and internal bruises I carry until this day.

After spanking me, they took off my clothes, put me in thin panties and positioned me against a gate. On the other side of the gate, I saw several men with huge knives watching me. They started beating me again and, when they were finally done, they opened the gate. With only panties on, I ran through the prisoners to leave the block. It was raining and I heard thunder. I leaned on the external wall of the block and bled in the rain, waiting to be found by someone. An officer came up to me and I begged him to take me out of there. He kept me there in the rain and shouted to another officer to bring shorts. After a while, three officers arrived. They gave me the shorts and asked questions. Only then, they took me to the hospital.

I could see the shock on the doctor's face. She politely asked me permission to touch me – the officers told her she did not need to be so polite with me. She wanted to do exams and x-rays, but they said it was not necessary as the prison had health facilities. One of the officers was very nervous and did not stop talking on the phone. The doctor had to release me without giving me any medication, not even for the pain. Back in prison, they left me in the infirmary's hallway. It was a dirty empty corridor. I was hurt, bleeding and wet. Another prisoner came to my help. He took off the panties I was still wearing and left me in my shorts.

I spent one week recovering in the infirmary. On the first day after the aggression, a nurse finally gave me some medicine for the pain. Two days later, I was finally sent to the police department for a forensic report. My face was swollen, and the doctor had to lift my shirt because I was unable to do it by myself. He saw a number 44 marked on my chest. We did not know what that was. After some debate, we finally thought of an answer: it was a shoe mark, which in Brazil is equivalent to a 30 cm shoe, left on my skin by a kick – a mark that lasted three days after the aggression. This was the simplest scar left by them. Some of my teeth were soft, some were broken. Nobody had done any x-rays on me. I felt horrible and traumatized.

During my recovery, they told me there would be an investigation to find out what happened and who was responsible for the aggression. To this day, nothing has been done.

#### 4. Recovering from prison

It has been one year since I left prison and I am still traumatized. I do not have any physical illnesses anymore, but I bear psychological ones. I cannot hear abrupt car noises or someone calling my name out loud without having an anxiety crisis. I cannot trust anyone anymore. The memory is still too painful.

I have been writing as a way to better understand myself and not let the prison experience change or shape me. I also have been doing therapy and planning to go back to college. But it is very difficult not to be shaped by prison, especially considering that being an ex-prisoner is a lifelong stigma. I have not been welcomed by my neighbourhood. Every job opportunity I apply to is denied to me. I was only accepted by human rights collectives: the Além das Grades group ('Beyond Bars group'), the GTP+ project<sup>13</sup> and the Gestos organisation<sup>14</sup>. I am not well received even in the Secretary of Ressocialization, where they are supposed to facilitate my reintegration into society. There is no help. 'Ressocialization' is an untruthful goal.

Anywhere in the world, prison is a violation. Some say it is a necessary violence. But I find it difficult to tell how the torture of minorities can be necessary or helpful in any way to build a democratic society.

In Brazil, being a LGBTQI+ prisoner is especially difficult. Certainly, my story is not the worst one. But I hope it brings attention to violations that are sometimes forgotten even by activists and researchers. That it sheds a light on how prison can be worse than imagined.

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<sup>13</sup> GTP+ is a collective that provides aid to HIV positive persons, at Recife, Brazil. More information, in Portuguese, < [www.gtp.org.br](http://www.gtp.org.br) > accessed 27 August 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Gestos is a NGO that defends the human rights of HIV positive and STDs vulnerable people in Pernambuco, Brazil.