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Gender, Exclusion, Transphobia, Murder, Memory, Change: Remembering Gisberta Salce Eighteen Years Later

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Abstract

In February 2006, a group of firefighters from Porto, Portugal, rescued a body with marks of aggression and naked from the waist down from the 15-metre-deep shaft of an abandoned building. The victim, who was ill and had taken refuge in that basement, had been beaten over several days by a group of fourteen teenage boys, some of whom were as young as 12 years old. The victim was first thought to have died from the assaults; later, the cause of death was established as drowning. As the autopsy confirmed, the victim had been beaten, burned with cigarettes, raped and thrown alive into a hole.

The victim, Gisberta Salce, was a 45-year-old trans woman. A Brazilian immigrant who had fled Brazil aged 18 to escape a wave of homicides against trans people in São Paulo and arrived in Portugal at the age of 20, in her later years Gisberta did sex work, lived with HIV/AIDS and was homeless in Porto. Three of her attackers had first befriended her, visiting her often, bringing her food and even preparing meals for her. When they spoke of "a man who had breasts" and "really looked like a woman" to eleven classmates, compassion swiftly turned into sadistic cruelty fuelled by the group's sick curiosity to determine whether Gisberta was a man or a woman based on her genitalia. Gisberta's plight and ultimate murder, the worst case of transphobia ever reported in Portugal, shocked the country to its core.

This paper aims to detail Gisberta's life as a trans woman at the same time it analyses the aggressors' trajectory from friendship into transphobia so as to discuss the gender-biased exclusion, victimization, and ultimate murder of Gisberta. This paper also intends to examine the ways in which Gisberta's brutal demise decisively shaped gender laws in Portugal while it also remembers the artistic tributes which have ensured that Gisberta is not forgotten throughout the last 18 years.

Keywords: Gisberta Salce, Gender, Exclusion, Transphobia, Murder, Memory, Change