



News and Views

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news and views

SEX WORKERS, USAID, AND BRAZILIAN RESISTANCE

In May 2005, the Brazilian government made the historic decision to refuse \$40 million from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for HIV/AIDS funding. They cited as the reason for their refusal the Bush administration's insistence on a public condemnation of prostitution. Pedro Chequer, director of Brazil's AIDS program and chair of the National Commission that decided to refuse the U.S. grants was reported by Michael M. Phillips and Matt Moffett in the *Wall Street Journal* (2 May 2005) as saying, "We can't control [the disease] with principles that are Manichean, theological, fundamentalist and Shiite."

We thought Brazil's decision was significant and surprising in that it placed the health of sex workers at the center of an international debate about how best to fight HIV/AIDS. According to Phillips and Moffett "Brazil appears to be the first major recipient nation to take such a definitive stand against U.S. efforts to link billions of dollars in foreign aid to conservative responses to social ills." Nonetheless, with the exception of this one important article in the *Wall Street Journal*, very little U.S. mainstream media attention has been paid to Brazil's decision. In an article published by the (London) *Guardian* on 4 May 2005, Adrienne Germain, president of the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC), insisted that "the Brazilian government's decision can not be overstated." In an effort to understand the significance of Brazil's refusal of AIDS funds, I asked Germain to elaborate further on why this decision mattered so much. The following report is informed largely by that interview.

According to Germain, Brazil's decision sheds light on the Bush administration's repressive policies toward countries and organizations working to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. Germain sees the Bush administration as imposing "a moral vision of the world that recognizes only heterosexual sex in marriage and that takes a very punitive position toward anyone that deviates from that stance." Indeed, along with conservative members of Congress, the Bush administration have been able to impose (or is work-

ing toward imposing) a number of repressive restrictions on non-profit organizations working on HIV/AIDS, which are staggering in their implications. Concerning prostitution, they have required all organization taking funds from USAID (even if their work has nothing to do with sex workers) to make a written pledge opposing commercial sex work or risk losing funding. This measure which was put in place in 2003 followed on the heels of “the Global Gag Rule”—a policy that bans USAID funds from going to any foreign-based organization that has links to abortion. Similar strictures on organizations that support needle exchange as a form of prevention are being challenged as well. The result of such policies is not only disastrous for sex workers but, as Germain points out, is a “death sentence given the way in which AIDS is spreading throughout the globe.”

That Brazil stood up to the Bush administration is in and of itself noteworthy; that they did so from a clear record of progress in fighting HIV/AIDS is even more significant. In 1995 the World Bank estimated that 1.2 million Brazilians would be infected with HIV by the year 2000. Today, the number of those estimated to be affected with the virus is down to approximately 600,000. Brazil’s strategy for curbing the spread of disease has been one of respectful engagement with the people most at risk since the 1980s. As Germain points out, Brazil has “from the beginning recognized that homosexual men were the most affected and have as a consequence targeted this group for testing and treatment.” As the disease grew among intravenous drug users, they responded by making anti-AIDS drugs widely available. More recently, they have worked directly and in an openly accepting way with female and male sex workers to encourage condom use and offer inexpensive treatment. Prostitution is legal in Brazil and organizations representing sex workers have been at the forefront of HIV/AIDS preventative work. This progressive approach to fighting AIDS has been one of the few bright spots in the international fight against the epidemic. As a July 16, 2003 segment on the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* explained, “When it comes to fighting AIDS, Brazil is one developing country that has defied the odds.”

Germain did point out, however, that Brazil’s progressive policies have not had perfect results. She told me that AIDS is on the increase among heterosexual women, many of whom have been infected by their hus-

bands. Brazil's response has been slower than it should be in addressing this new demographic and feminist groups engaged in HIV/AIDS work have not enjoyed the same power and influence among policymakers as other groups. Despite these struggles, Brazil's refusal to denounce sex workers, their policy of open engagement with the most vulnerable, and their clear track record of progress in fighting HIV/AIDS offers other countries an alternative model for fighting the disease and the regressive policies of the Bush administration.

To read more about the important work that Germain and others are doing at IWHC (see, in particular, their important publication, *Bush's Other War: The Assault on Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights*) visit their website at <http://www.iwhc.org>.

In addition to Adrienne Germain, I wish to thank Jennifer Kidwell for her help with this report.

To learn more about the numerous conditions the Bush administration has imposed on organizations wishing to receive USAID funds see Kaiser Family Foundation Daily Reports, "Politics and Policy: Bush Administration to Require U.S. AIDS Groups Take Pledge Opposing Commercial Sex Work to Gain Funding," www.KaiserNetwork.org, 28 Feb. 2005.

—Sharon Groves

CELEBRATING "OFF OUR BACKS" 35 YEARS OF INDEPENDENT FEMINIST PUBLISHING

In March 2005 I attended the annual Independent Press Association (IPA) conference where I learned about a couple very positive trends for progressive thought in this country. First, I learned that progressive magazines and news journals are flourishing (for example, the circulation for Mother Jones and the Nation has, for instance, been steadily increasing since President Bush was elected). Second, I learned that new startup feminist magazines and news journals are on the increase as well. In upcoming issues we hope to highlight some of the new independent feminist publications emerging in the United States. As a prelude to this focus, however, we thought it was fitting to start a series on feminist independent publishing by first looking backward at the oldest feminist news journal still in publication, Off Our

Backs. *For this interview I had the pleasure of talking to long-time member of the Off Our Backs collective, Karla Mantilla, about their struggles, successes, and philosophy about feminist publishing.*

—Sharon Groves

SG: How would you describe the work that *Off Our Backs* does?

KM: One of our most distinguishing features is our longstanding commitment to the idea that feminism is an international and global movement. This has been a focus since our inception and we feel that many feminists in the United States are not aware of how alive the feminist movement is around the world. Each issue of *Off Our Backs* is filled with information about feminist international issues and we devote a whole issue each year to international themes. We are also a grassroots organization committed to a grassroots philosophy of publication. We regularly publish feminist pieces by people who are not professional authors. We accept pieces by women who do not agree with us. We see ourselves as representing a forum for feminist thought where feminists can debate with one another. In addition to our international focus, we try always to include pieces on material that is widely seen. Thus, for instance, we will publish reviews of television shows, music, books, movies, and other forms of popular culture.

SG: What kind of changes have you noticed in the last thirty five years and how have these changes affected your publishing?

KM: Since I joined the collective eleven years ago, my sense is that people have to work harder and longer than they used to at their paid jobs and thus they often don't have the kind of time available for volunteering that they once had. *Off Our Backs* has been able to survive for so long largely through the enormous volunteer energy we've received. The fact that people in the Washington, D.C., area where we are located are exhausted by their day jobs has made it difficult to recruit new volunteers. Also, when we first began we were one of the few feminist publications. Although we never think of ourselves in competition with other feminist publications, the fact that there are other sources out there makes it harder to sustain the volunteer numbers that we once had.

SG: How has the journal itself changed in the last thirty five years?

KM: One big change has been the look of the journal, which has shifted from newspaper format to a magazine format. We now consider ourselves a news journal—by which I mean a publication that focuses on news that is not published elsewhere but that is also devoted to exploring feminist ideas. We now come out bimonthly (six times a year). This has not changed the content of our publication—we're just considerably thicker now than we used to be.

In many respects the journal has remained similar to our original vision. We have always had an international focus, have always been a forum for a wide feminist perspective, and we have always been engaged in challenging race, class, and issues of sexuality within an international feminist framework. We have also always looked at feminism from a broad perspective that sees itself as offering a strong social justice perspective for a variety of oppressed groups.

SG: How do you see your relationship with other feminist publishing venues—i.e., the rise of new independent magazines such as *Bitch* or *Bust*, or more academic-leaning feminist journals such as *Feminist Studies*, *Meridians*, or *Signs*?

KM: We maintain quite a bit of contact with many different feminist publications, and we try to share information when we can. Just as a variety of feminist tactics are necessary politically (i.e., legislative and anti-establishment activism), a variety of feminist publications are also needed to express new and different viewpoints and offer a different handle on the issues. When we're moving in unison, we're moving the best.

SG: Many progressive-leaning independent magazines have reported a rise in interest with the new political climate. Have you noticed this? Does it bode well for the future of feminist publications such as *Off Our Backs*?

KM: We have recently experienced an increase in our revenue due largely to our direct mail fundraising campaign—something we've never done in our history before. I think like other "Indies" we've seen a slight bump in subscriptions because of the political climate as well. Clearly part of our success has to do with people looking for alternative sources of information in this repressive political moment.

SG: Anything else you would like our readers to know?

KM: I would like people to think of *Off Our Backs* as publishing work from a variety of feminist viewpoints. I'd also like to strongly encourage *Feminist Studies* readers to consider submitting work to *Off Our Backs* as well as to *Feminist Studies*. If you're angry about a movie or TV show or wish to discuss an issue that you feel needs more attention, consider writing to us.

For additional information on *Off Our Backs*, visit their website: www.offfourbacks.org.