In a historic gathering in Salvador, Bahia, nearly 100 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Afro-Brazilian activists participated in the country's first-ever National Black LGBT Conference (Primeiro Seminário Nacional de Negras e Negros LGBT).

Given the rare opportunity to be recognized as a unique group that suffers from discrimination based on race, sexual orientation and gender identities, attendees provided passionate accounts of their daily struggles for survival and acceptance. Embodying a collective sentiment of fear, exhaustion and frustration, black lesbian activist Joelma Cezário said, "I'm not afraid of losing my job. I'm afraid of being killed." Her feelings were echoed by countless others.

Tragically, Joelma's story is not an anomaly: LGBT Afro-Brazilians are frequently subject to violent hate crimes, police abuse, educational and health disparities, and above all, invisibility. Their needs are often ignored by leading Afro-Brazilian and LGBT advocates, who overlook the presence of LGBT Afro-Brazilians in both groups.

Absent from the collective conscience, almost no data has been collected to understand the hardships of LGBT Afro-Brazilians, and no efforts have been made to help them overcome the challenges they face.

Upon presenting their demands to government representatives at the national conference — such as calling for racial indicators to be included in anti-LGBT violence data collection and for racial equality programs to account for the Afro-LGBT population — they were pushed back-and-forth between LGBT and racial discrimination experts who avoided answering their questions and directed responsibility to each other.

Meanwhile, the mounting violence against the Black LGBT population in Brazil isn't even being counted in official statistics. A recent report found that the number of homicides against Afro-Brazilians increased by 5.6 percent in the last decade, compared to a 24.8-percent

reduction in homicides among Whites.

These figures did not distinguish which victims were killed because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Similarly, a government report issued earlier this year recorded nearly 300 anti-LGBT hate crimes in 2011, more than half of which were targeted against the estimated 10 percent of LGBT Brazilians who identify as transgender. The report failed to provide any information regarding the victims' racial identity.

Despite an increasingly evident correlation, public institutions continue to fail to take action against the pervasive violence and discrimination that is specific to the Afro-LGBT population.

Thought to have one of the highest rates of anti-LGBT violence in the world, in 2011 Brazil reported 18 of 26 human rights violations identified by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' (IACHR) Unit for the Rights of LGBTI Persons.

Examples include an instance in which Afro-Brazilian twin brothers walking arm-in-arm through their hometown in Bahia were brutally attacked by a group of eight men in June. Mistaken for a same-sex couple, one brother was killed and the other suffered from critical wounds.

More recently, Brazil's first openly Afro-descendent transgender public official, Madalena Leite de Moura, was elected to city council in Piracicaba, São Paulo. Since her victory, she has received repeated death threats warning that she will be killed on the day she takes office in January.

Despite the tremendous obstacles they face, Afro-LGBT activists will not fall to intimidation and violence. They have been relentless in their efforts to defend silenced victims and to advocate for a better future. Joining forces in September 2005, they formed the Rede Nacional de Negras e Negros LGBT (National Black LGBT Network,) and have since developed an extensive advocacy network and coordinated numerous regional and national events.

They hold a permanent seat on the Conselho Nacional de Combate a Discriminação e Promoção dos Direitos de Lésbicas, Gays, Bissexuais, Travestis e

Transexuais—CNCD/LGBT(National Council on LGBT Discrimination) and after years of arduous insistence, have acquired representation on the Conselho Nacional de Promoção da Igualdade Racial—CNPIR (National Council on Racial Discrimination.)

Afro-LGBT members of the Rede Nacional, CNCD/LGBT and CNPIR continue to tirelessly articulate their demands to local and federal governments. Most recently, they developed a list of innovative public policy proposals at November's national conference, in which they called for enhanced data collection, public security initiatives, and sexual health outreach.

Although making progress is challenging, it is by no means unattainable. Specifically, a greater willingness across the hemisphere to engage in and reflect upon these issues will enhance cooperation and produce encouraging results.

In its first-ever decision to condemn discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, the Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACHR) ruled this year that Chile was required to return custody of two daughters to their lesbian mother, Karen Atala, and recommended a series of measures to outlaw and prevent further instances of discrimination.

Similarly, Argentina made history months later when it approved the world's most progressive gender identity law, protecting transgender people against violence and discrimination, and providing them the right to legally and medically change their gender without intrusive regulations.

By following the lead of its regional partners, Brazil too can serve as a model to countless others in defending the rights of Afro-LGBT people. By committing to increased collaboration and developing intersecting strategies against discrimination, it will produce more effective results and reach a broader population.

It will stimulate economic growth by unleashing the potential of a group of incredibly unique and talented individuals, in addition to broadening educational opportunities and reducing violence. Moreover, it will strengthen human rights institutions in preparing them to appropriately address today's realities.

But most importantly, it will change the lives of countless people who remain silenced in fear and despair, and whose stories we may otherwise never come to know.

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