

## Rape and the Basic Unfairness of Brazil's Society

Written by Jennifer Bisgaier  
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In late March, the brutal gang rape of an American tourist in a transit van in Rio de Janeiro garnered worldwide attention. Brazilian authorities responded by quickly arresting three suspects as well as banning vans being driven through the South Zone of the city. However, just two weeks earlier a Brazilian woman from the North Zone of Rio, which consists largely of a favela district, was raped by the same men in the same van, and the Brazilian government took no action.

While these crimes draw attention to the alarming skein of dangers that almost all women face in Brazil, they also highlight the severe lack of help that disadvantaged women receive if attacked. Brazilian society is deeply divided based on race and class, and this discrimination is often reflected in the vigor of the country's police response to crime.

In an anonymous interview with *The New York Times*, the young Brazilian woman who was first attacked explained how the police displayed little initiative when she went to them for help: "[They told me] if they caught them — if — that it usually just becomes a statistic." [1]

While the Brazilian woman received little empathy from authorities, and never heard back after filing an initial report, the assault on the American woman prompted an instant response from Rio's Special Police Unit for Tourism Support (Delegacia de Atendimento ao Turista; DEAT).

This case serves as a powerful example of the basic unfairness based on class, as well as race, that is far too common in Brazil.

The outlook puts all women visiting or living in Brazil in greater danger. The Brazilian woman stated, "Unfortunately, it had to happen to her before anyone would help me... Could this have been avoided if they had paid attention to my case?" [2] With rape becoming an increasingly pervasive issue in Brazil, it is vital that the police treat every single report with gravity.

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Brazilian political leaders are quick to point out the lengths that Brazil has gone to in order to ensure the safety of women. Two decades ago the country established DEAMs (Delegacias Especiais de Atendimento à Mulher, or Special Police Stations for the Assistance of Women) to ensure provision of legal help for survivors of sexual assault. There are currently 450 DEAMs across the country. [3]

In 2006, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva passed the Maria da Penha Law of Domestic and Family Violence, which created special courts for prosecuting acts of domestic violence and called for more severe and comprehensive punishment of offenders. Three years later, the broadening of the definition of rape (to include anal penetration) led to a sharp increase in the number of incidents reported.

Despite these advances, rape remains a serious problem in Brazil. According to the Institute of Public Safety, the number of reported rapes in Rio rose by 23 percent in 2012, up to 6029 (an average of 16 per day). [4]

New York City, by way of comparison, in 2010 reported 1,036 reported rapes, according to data provided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. [5] Considering that New York has a larger population than Rio, Rio's statistics are especially alarming.

Though Rio's rising numbers may well reflect an increased willingness on the part of some survivors to come forward, they still indicate a need for more aggressive law enforcement against sexual predators.

With the World Cup and Olympic Games approaching, Brazil is looking to hurriedly ramp up its security provisions. Total investment in public security is speculated to add up to US\$ 550 million to the event's total cost, despite protestors' concerns regarding excessive spending on these events. [6]

While obviously any improvements in the area of women's safety should be valued, it is alarming that the country's authorities must have a global spotlight focused on the issue in order to take action.

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Brazilian authorities should feel sufficient motivation to provide protection for their own citizens, not just for the foreigners who attract international attention.

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