

vocês conseguem imaginar o que é uma  
puta que saiu da boca do lixo e chegou a  
candidata a deputada federal?

do you know what it means for a puta from the red light  
district to be a candidate for Federal Deputy?

# Um Beijo para Gabriela

*a kiss for gabriela*

UM FILME DE LAURA MURRAY

DISCUSSION GUIDE +DVD

## WHO IS GABRIELA LEITE?

Gabriela is one of the most well known activists for sex worker rights in Brazil. Born in 1951 into a middle class family in São Paulo, she is the daughter of counter-culture movements in the 1970s that fought against the country's dictatorship and in favor of a sexual revolution. Gabriela studied sociology at a prestigious university in São Paulo and in the late 1970s, left her studies and a secretarial job at one of the city's largest companies for a higher salary and bohemian lifestyle in prostitution, working in the red light districts of São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, and Rio de Janeiro. She began organizing with sex workers in the mid-1980s in response to the frequent human rights abuses experienced by her colleagues, including violence, stigma, harassment from the police, and discrimination in public health services. In 1987 she organized the first national meeting of sex workers in Brazil, and soon after, in 1988, founded *Beijo da Rua* (Kiss from the Street), a newspaper about prostitution and rights for sex workers and their allies throughout the country. In 1989, she began working in partnership with the Ministry of Health in the fight against AIDS, and for the following two decades, worked with the government to develop non-stigmatizing and rights based approaches to HIV prevention which involved sex workers themselves in project design and implementation.



Gabriela founded the non-governmental organization Davida in the early 1990s. The organization uses cultural strategies—such as theatre and fashion—to reduce stigma and broaden public support for sex worker rights. In 2005, Davida launched the clothing line *Daspu* – Of the Whores – to provide financial stability for Davida’s activism. *Daspu*’s collections are produced in partnership with professional designers and sex workers model on catwalks created in streets, clubs, theaters, universities, art exhibits, and international conferences as part of fashion shows that attract wide national and international media attention. Gabriela has authored two books including *Woman of the Life*, and *Daughter, Mother, Grandmother and Whore*, which was adapted for theatre and is currently being made into a feature film. In 2010, she made history by becoming the first sex worker to run for Congress – the story that forms the focus of the documentary. To know more about Gabriela and what she has been up to since the filming of the documentary, see the 2013 interview with her as a special extra on the DVD.





## WHAT IS THE CONTEXT SURROUNDING “A KISS FOR GABRIELA”?

When Gabriela Leite told director Laura Murray that she was planning to run for federal office, Laura knew immediately that she had to make a documentary about the campaign. Gabriela’s decision to run for office marked a historic moment for the sex workers’ rights movement. With a campaign platform defending civil union for gays, the rights of people living with HIV and AIDS, the legalization of abortion, and complete decriminalization of prostitution, Gabriela was one of the most progressive and controversial of the 822 candidates on the ballot. The following brief overview contextualizes the issues Gabriela confronted during her campaign. More information can be found on the documentary’s website ([www.akissforgabriela.com](http://www.akissforgabriela.com)).

The sex industry in Brazil is diverse. People of all genders, races, classes, and ages work as sex workers and the industry is composed of a wide range of sexual services and venues that vary depending on the social context. Although the sale of sex for money is not illegal in Brazil provided the sex worker is over 18, the continued illegality of many activities associated with prostitution, such

as benefiting from the proceeds and maintaining premises where it occurs, has made advocating for sex workers' labor rights nearly impossible. Gabriela and the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes continue to advocate for legal reform to change this, yet Brazil's increasingly conservative congress and strong religious lobby have made both this and legalizing abortion, one of Gabriela's other campaign issues in 2010, difficult.

The term "sex work" is attributed to US activist Carol Leigh who coined it in the late 1970s in order to foster the understanding that the exchange of sex for money is a form of labor like any other. The term has since been adopted by many groups globally to demand recognition that "sex work is work". Despite the popularity of the term "sex work", the terminology used to refer to sex for remuneration varies across countries and contexts. For example, the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes advocates for the use of the term "prostitute" instead of "sex worker" in order to destigmatize and reclaim the word prostitute and many activists in the United States use the term "sex trade".

Stigma and criminalization of prostitution-related activities contribute to the perpetuation of human rights violations against sex workers both in Brazil and around the world. Sex work and associated activities such as solicitation and maintaining a place of prostitution remain criminalized in many countries. Misguided anti-trafficking efforts and powerful lobbies for criminalization in countries where sex work was not previously illegal are worrisome trends as is the use of criminal laws to address what are often labor issues.

In 2008, the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes published a report documenting the most frequent rights violations experienced by sex workers in the country. Concerns included police violence, extortion, harassment and violence from drug dealers, expulsion from public spaces, and workplace related labor rights violations. Since 2011, urban "revitalization" efforts and clean-up campaigns in preparation for the 2014 World Cup soccer tournament and 2016 Summer Olympics have lead to some of the biggest crackdowns on prostitution in Brazil in a decade, including mass policing of prostitution in public spaces and the shuttering of indoor prostitution-related venues.

Rather than positioning themselves as victims, sex workers in Brazil and internationally fight to be seen as protagonists of their own lives, citizens

of the world, and respected mothers, daughters, colleagues, neighbors, partners, activists, writers, and even candidates for governmental office. A KISS FOR GABRIELA was made in this spirit, and the guide was produced to reinforce the importance that those who wish to support sex workers should engage in the fight to protect sex worker rights as allies, rather than saviors.

## WHAT IS THE BRAZILIAN PROSTITUTES NETWORK?

The Brazilian Network of Prostitutes is the strongest coalition of organizations advocating for sex workers' human and labor rights in Brazil. It is made up of over thirty organizations of prostitutes throughout Brazil's five regions. Core principles of the Network include defending prostitution as a form of labor and ensuring that prostitution and prostitutes' rights are acknowledged as sexual rights. A full description of the Network's political positions is outlined via a "Letter of Principles", which can be linked to through the documentary's website.



The Network was founded in the 1980s amidst the popular movements that emerged during the country's redemocratization after two decades of dictatorship. At the first national Network meeting in 1987, sex workers denounced police violence and called for an end to the negative association between prostitution and disease. In the early 1990s through the mid-2000s, the Network partnered with the Ministry of Health to design and implement rights based-HIV prevention projects that worked to dismantle stigma and discrimination, fully decriminalize the buying and selling of sex, promote access to health services and strengthen sex worker organizations in Brazil.

Gabriela and the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes successfully fought to have sex work officially recognized as an occupation by the Brazilian Ministry of Labor and Employment in 2002, thereby entitling sex workers to social security and other work benefits. The Network then lobbied in 2003 for a proposed federal law that would have affirmed the profession as labor and removed penal codes associated with it. Unfortunately, this law was not passed.

In June of 2005 the Network stepped into the international spotlight when member organizations protested a directive from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) that mandated that all recipient organizations have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution. Brazil—in a decision made in partnership with the Network—was the only country worldwide to publicly refuse to sign what came to be known as the “anti-prostitution pledge” included in contractual agreements. This decision caused Brazil to forgo over \$40 million dollars of restricted USAID funding for HIV prevention.

Law reform remains one of the main goals of the Network. In 2012, Federal Deputy Jean Wyllys proposed a new law—named in honor of Gabriela—to decriminalize prostitution related businesses and clarify ambiguities in the penal code related to sexual exploitation. The Gabriela Leite Law is currently being debated in the Brazilian congress.

## WHAT IS SEX WORKER ACTIVISM LIKE IN OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD?

Sex workers have organized to demand their rights in every part of the world. They have created activist organizations, unions and associations of many different kinds at national, regional and international levels, including the international umbrella group Network of Sex Work Projects ([www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org)). They advocate for their rights to be recognized by their local governments and international decision-making bodies such as the United Nations, drawing attention to legal issues and labor rights, violence, HIV and STI prevention and the negative effects of the conflation of sex work with trafficking, among others.

Communities of sex workers defend their rights on a day-to-day basis at the grassroots level even when they have not yet established formal organizations. A 2009 report— *Rights Not Rescue* released by the Open Society Foundations— provides numerous examples of how sex workers of all genders in Southern Africa band together locally to distribute information about work safety, build community banking systems that allow sex workers to save what they earn, ensure access to condoms, and fight back against police harassment. Systems of peer support of this kind have been documented in many other parts of the world illustrating how sex workers from Cambodia to Kenya to Kyrgyzstan are striving to address violence, fight for access to resources such as education and health care, and work collectively to address stigma and marginalization.





## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the film Gabriela embraces many identities (wife, whore, activist, woman) in public political discourse. What do you think Gabriela was hoping to achieve by describing herself this way? How did you feel when Gabriela described herself this way publically? Why do you think you felt this way?
2. Gabriela's husband is by her side throughout her campaign. What does this relationship tell us about gender and political life? How are the male partners of women sex workers normally portrayed in media accounts, public discourse and the law? How does the portrayal of Gabriela and her husband's relationship disrupt these stereotypes?
3. In the film, Gabriela states, "I like the word puta (whore), because one day, I want this to be a pretty word. Because you cannot start a movement by hiding under the table". What do you think Gabriela seeks by defending the word "puta"? What other terms are you familiar with that are used to describe sex workers of different genders? What do you think might be the significance and implications of these different terms for organizations and movements that defend sex worker rights?
4. Based on the issues raised in the film and described in this guide, what are the key rights-based demands being made by sex workers in Brazil? What actions could you take to support sex worker rights and health in your area? (Consult the documentary website [www.akissforgabriela.com/?page\\_id=2886](http://www.akissforgabriela.com/?page_id=2886) for ideas and hear Gabriela's own ideas in her DVD interview)
5. Gabriela ran for office in 2010 as a candidate for the Green Party, a party that worked with her in 2003 to propose a federal law to fully decriminalize prostitution. How important is it that sex workers build relationships with mainstream institutions and political parties? What steps do sex workers need to take to establish these relationships, raise awareness of their issues and effect change? Consider the example of Brazil and then consider how this might be happening or could happen in your own environment. What should sex workers consider in deciding whether to engage in these forms of advocacy and what barriers might they face? Who are their allies?
6. In many countries people are skeptical about electoral processes because "money talks" in terms of who wins, who loses and even who has an opportunity to run as a candidate. What lessons about these issues are portrayed in the film? What other arenas can sex workers, or any constituent group, explore to gain leverage for change? (Think for example about how Daspu used fashion.)