

**Global Feminisms
Comparative Case Studies of
Women's Activism and Scholarship**

BRAZIL

Iara Amora dos Santos

Interviewed by Sueann Caulfield

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Iara Amora dos Santos was born in 1984 in Fortaleza, the capital of the state of Ceará, in northeastern Brazil. She is a project supervisor and the co-founder of the young women's group at CAMTRA, where she has been working since 1999 (Casa da Mulher Trabalhadora, The Center for the Working Woman, founded in 1997). A feminist activist and lawyer, Iara received her B.A. in Law from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. She has a degree in Women and Human Rights from the Law School at the University of Chile. From 2008-2010, she was the representative of CAMTRA to the State Counsel of Youth in Rio de Janeiro.

Sueann Caulfield is Associate Professor of History at the University of Michigan, where she was the former director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and currently heads the Brazil Initiative Social Sciences Cluster. She specializes in the history of modern Brazil, with emphasis on gender and sexuality. She has won awards and fellowships from the Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Humanities, and American Council of Learned Societies. Her publications include *In Defense of Honor: Morality, Modernity, And Nation In Early Twentieth-Century Brazil*, the co-edited volume *Honor, Status, and Law in Modern Latin American History*, and various articles on gender and historiography, family law, race, and sexuality in Brazil. Her current research focuses on family history with a focus on paternity and legitimacy in twentieth-century Brazil. She is particularly interested in questions of human rights in Latin America, and has participated in a number of workshops, cross-country teaching projects, and exchanges around topics of social justice and social action.

The Global Feminisms Project is a collaborative international oral history project that examines feminist activism, women's movements, and academic women's studies in sites around the world. Housed at the University of Michigan, the project was started in 2002 with a grant from the Rackham Graduate School. The virtual archive includes interviews from women activists and scholars from Brazil, China, India, Nicaragua, Poland, and the United States.

Our collaborators in Brazil are at the Laboratório de História Oral e Imagem - UFF (the Laboratory of Oral History and Images at the Federal Fluminense University in Rio de Janeiro, [LABHOI](#)) and Núcleo de História, Memória e Documento (the Center for History, Memory, and Documentation at the Federal State University in Rio de Janeiro, [NUMEM](#)). The Brazil interviews were conducted with support from the Third Century Learning Initiative and the Brazil Initiative (Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies), both at the University of Michigan, FAPERJ (The Research Support Fund in Rio de Janeiro), and CNPq (The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development in Brazil).

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Sueann Caulfield: We are talking with Iara Amora from the House of the Working Woman [*Casa da Mulher Trabalhadora*] in Rio de Janeiro – in Lapa, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I want to start by talking a little bit about this organization, the House of the Working Woman. What is it about? What kind of work do they do, and how did this work get started. Can you talk a bit about the organization?

Iara Amora dos Santos: Yes, CAMTRA,¹ the House of the Working Woman, it's an NGO, a feminist institution, and it's been around for 16 years, or 17. I don't remember. It was founded in 1997. And we work on educating women, from the perspective of rights, education, and information about the access to rights. We work on educating new leaders, which is particularly focused on young women, educating feminist leaders. We work with groups of unstable workers, like retail workers, informal workers, migrant workers, and we try to inform them about rights, about access to their rights. We work with community leadership, and women participating in this kind of work. And we also give guidance in cases of violations of rights, we send people to the police station, to the hospital. So in general, we work on the education and information about women's rights, violence.

SC: And when you say education, do you mean through courses, or by sending activists into the streets to talk with women? And how do you identify [the women]? So – what type of education, and how does it work?

IAS: Well, the strategy depends on the audience, right? For young women, for instance, we start with an annual course – it was the 5th year last year. The course, “Young Women in Defense of their Rights,” is an awareness-building course where we talk about violence, sexism, racism, homophobia, sexuality. We start with the course, and then we organize activities with these young women in their communities, where they live or where they study; we respond to their requests, to their own organizations. So there are some young women who participate in a more on-going way. They come to the course and then there's follow-up. But we also need to reach the women who aren't going to come to the course – they're not coming to a meeting on the weekend, or at night. So we also organize activities in the communities where they live. Sometimes workshops, sometimes classes, but also street activities – like distributing pamphlets, or organizing cultural activities – to reach other young women who are not coming to CAMTRA or to a course. With other groups, for instance the workers of SAARA,² which is a commercial center, or migrant workers, we do real street work. We have a methodology that we developed called the Tent of Rights. We put a tent in the streets – we bring a tent, a table, a chair, and informational materials. We distribute everything to them, including condoms. In SAARA specifically, we have been working since 1999. We used to have a tent up there every day, but not nowadays.

¹ Their website, in Portuguese: <http://www.camtra.org.br/> (accessed 4/9/15).

² SAARA (Society of Friends of Rua Alfândega and Surroundings) is an open-air commercial center in downtown Rio de Janeiro. <http://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-entertainment/saara-the-centro-market-in-rio/#> (accessed 4/9/15).

SC: Can you – just for those who don't know Rio de Janeiro – can you explain a bit about the neighborhood of SAARA and the many migrant women workers.

IAS: SAARA is a popular commercial center in downtown Rio de Janeiro, where there are more than 6,000 businesses. There are stores there, and workers for those stores – but even for the ones who are hired, it's an area with massive irregularity regarding workers' rights. Rights are not respected. It's undervalued work. You're not going to find among the SAARA workers the same kind of worker that you'll find at the mall. The person who works at SAARA is not going to get a job at the mall or at a store in the South Zone.³ Those are workers from the poor areas of Rio, who maybe finished high school or middle school, and it's really very unstable – exploitation and turnover. And then, besides the workers in the stores, there are also the migrant workers who sell around this area or on Uruguaiana Street, which is closer. So really, it's a big concentration of shops, where there are more than 6,000 places, thousands of workers – women and men workers.

SC: So, one aspect of the work of the House of the Working Woman is that you set up a tent, and have pamphlets with information. And in this case, someone would be there to welcome people who would be interested, to explain about rights and health.

IAS: Yes, exactly. Sexual health, reproductive health, and sexually transmitted diseases, the distribution of condoms. These are the things we do permanently. For a long time, we had a list of stores where there were people who would get condoms every month. We still have the list, but now we're trying to change the structure a little. Instead of bringing it to them every month, we are checking if they would come and get it, because we don't have the structure for this. There are more than thirty stores, more than three hundred people on the list. So the infrastructure would have to be big, to be delivering from store to store. So we distribute pamphlets, talk about diseases. Another thing we do on rights is to work with the feminist calendar.⁴ So now in July there will be the day of the black Latin American and Caribbean woman, July 25. So we're going to organize a special tent about the black woman, we're going to make a specific pamphlet about black women, about the question of discrimination, about rights, and we're going to work more specifically with this theme. So we're using the feminist calendar as a tool to disseminate information about rights and to reach those women.

Another thing we do with these workers, when we can, is try to represent their reality correctly. So we made a documentary film⁵ about the workers at SAARA, about their self-

³ The South Zone (*Zona Sul*) is a district of the city of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, including the famous Ipanema and Copacabana neighborhoods. It is the wealthiest district of the city, known internationally for its beach coastline. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rio_de_Janeiro#South_Zone (accessed 4/9/15).

⁴ Iara is referring to national and international dates that honor or recognize women, such as International Women's Day on March 8 or the International Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Day on July 25. See for example <http://blackwomenofbrazil.co/> (accessed 5/18/15).

⁵ For an article, in Portuguese, about this project, including a link to the video, see <http://www.tonorumo.org.br/2014/03/video-mostra-dura-rotina-das-trabalhadoras-no-comercio-popular->

esteem. We did some research, both about the migrant workers and the store workers, to get to know more about their everyday life – how many hours they work, how many hours they spend commuting, who does the domestic work, who takes care of their kids while they are working. So we do work at the local level, but we also try to get data about those women so that we might influence public policies and use this information elsewhere.

SC: So, if I understand correctly, the organization provides information, and is educational in this sense. And who finances CAMTRA? Are you an NGO?

IAS: Yes.

SC: So, this is not public money, right?

IAS: No. We have a number of sponsorships. Right now we have a sponsorship from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.⁶ We have different funding sources, and not any regular sponsorship that maintains the structure of the organization. We have various institutions that we partner with, but not a regular funding source. In the U.S., there is an institution that has helped us often, many times already – the Global Funds for Women.⁷ Since the very beginning of our institution, we've gotten funding for many projects. This year we also got one. And then we also have the help of small funds in Brazil, like FASE.⁸ So that's the kind of support that I mean like this, they're not regular. They always focus on a specific project. But those are institutions that we can maintain a partnership with, that we go back to for certain things. But the majority are external resources, from outside of Brazil.

SC: Can you talk more about how this institution was created? How did the idea emerge, and how was the institution founded?

IAS: So, CAMTRA was created, it was founded by its director, Eleutéria.

SC: She was the director of what?

Iara: Eleutéria was the main coordinator of CAMTRA. She was an activist against the dictatorship,⁹ and she had been active for years in political parties. She was active against the dictatorship, in this movement against the dictatorship. Later she moved away from

[do-rj/](#) (accessed 5/19/15). The article is entitled: "Video Shows Hard Routines of Workers in a Popular Commercial Center in Rio de Janeiro."

⁶ The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is a German political education institution focusing on democratic socialism. Find out more at <http://www.rosalux.de/english/foundation.html> (accessed 4/9/15).

⁷ Global Funds for Women is an American organization that invests in women-led organizations. Find out more at <http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/> (accessed 4/9/15).

⁸ FASE (Federation of Organizations for Social and Educational Assistance) is a Brazilian NGO founded in 1961 that supports social groups focusing on urban justice, environmental issues, women's rights, and food production and distribution. Find out more at <http://fase.org.br/en/> (accessed 4/9/15).

⁹ The dictatorship refers to the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil for 20 years, from 1964 to 1985. It began with a coup d'état led by the Armed Forces against President João Goulart of the National Labour Party. Especially in the context of the Cold War, conservatives viewed Goulart as too far to the left; the United States supported the coup against him.

this path of party politics,¹⁰ and at some given moment, well, I mean even when she was there doing that work, she was already discussing issues related to women. But at a certain point she made a choice, she made a rupture, by leaving this mixed space [of party politics and women's activism] and turning specifically just to the work with women. So there's a thing she always said, that this developed from her personal experience – of having three daughters, of being a mother with three daughters, and seeing the lack of public policies for the woman worker, for the mother. So the institution was sort of born from this personal experience too.

SC: And can we talk a bit about you? For sure you weren't in the beginning of this... You seem a lot younger than a person who was working in the '60s or '70s. When did you start, and what brought you to this work – if you can talk a bit about your professional life, but also about your personal life. What made you want to work in a place like this one?

IAS: There's no way that I can separate this. The institution was founded in 1997, and I am Elutéria's daughter. So it's impossible to separate.

SC: So, you're one of those three daughters?

IAS: I am! I've been here at this institution since I was 14.

SC: Your mom was an activist, she was creating --

IAS: Yes, this was at the beginning of the institution, and there was no infrastructure, no team. So I was here a lot. And also, it was her strategy – come and help, answer the phone, do this. And I always say, in truth, CAMTRA was my big school of life. I came when I was 14 and I'm going to turn 30. So in truth I became a feminist, I was educated as a feminist. Really I learned – as a person, my ideologies – this really had to do with my work at CAMTRA. So it's really impossible to separate these things. When I started here, I was still in high school, I was studying at a high school – now I've finished college, I studied law.¹¹

SC: So, you're a lawyer?

IAS: Yes, I'm a lawyer. And I did a graduate course in Chile – a non-degree graduate course in Chile about human rights and women, at the University of Chile, independent from my academic training. And for sure, I've learned many more things here, much more than in college. I was in a faculty of law, and didn't study anything about women's rights, or

¹⁰ The *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Worker's Party) is one of the largest left-wing parties in Latin America, launched in 1980 in Brazil in opposition to military dictatorships. It follows the democratic socialist trend, which differs from communism by embracing socialist economics but maintaining a democratic political system.

¹¹ Law school in Brazil is taught at the undergraduate level. Upon the completion of the five-year curriculum, students receive a Bachelors of Law.

http://www.ibanet.org/PPID/Constituent/Student_Committee/qualify_lawyer_Brazil.aspx (accessed 4/9/15).

anything about conventions that exist about women. I finished college in 2008, and the Maria da Penha Law¹² was in 2006, but that was like a speck in all of the material that the professors taught, and there was really nothing to do about that. So really, my education as an activist, as a professional, it happened at this institution.

SC: But you took a course in Chile, specifically about...

IAS: Yes, yes.

SC: How do you see the relationship, or how important is it for you, between theoretical thinking or the intellectual thinking about women's condition and the history of women and of feminism, and practice, the practice of working with people, with working women, providing this education.

IAS: So I think intellectual training doesn't happen only at college. Here we also make knowledge, we also study. But this graduate course specifically was very important for me because for the first time I got it that I have a space that connects those two experiences. College was something totally isolated from my experience as an activist, as a feminist. So in the course, because it was a specific program on human rights, directed at women's human rights, it was the first time that I succeeded in connecting these two realms. And from there, I studied the feminist theory of law. These were things I had never heard of in college. There were people studying the theoretical feminists, but never with a focus on the law specifically. So this was very important in this sense too.

SC: But on the other hand, you say that it's not only in college, it's not just from intellectuals and professionals that you learn and make knowledge. What do you learn from people? Both from your colleagues here, and from other people whom you work with, such as the women workers you serve.

IAS: I think everything. It's like this: we don't go to any space where it's just that we bring our own knowledge. We exchange, and we work with the life experience of everyone. It isn't worth it for me to arrive in some territory with the Maria da Penha Law and say, "Here's the law, so go to the police station." This woman can't go to the police station, because the police won't go where she is, so they are not going to protect her life, so it's an exchange all the time. It's about talking – both informing about the legal tools, but also asking what is their reality, what can work in that reality. What are other strategies, other alternatives they are creating, right?

¹² The Maria da Penha Law on Domestic and Family Violence was passed by the Brazilian government in 2006, named after Maria da Penha who suffered from domestic violence and whose case remained forgotten in court for two decades. This law aims to criminalize domestic violence and make prosecution in these cases more effective. Although violence rates have significantly decreased, domestic violence is still a major issue in Brazil due to challenges with implementation, especially in rural areas. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2011/8/maria-da-penha-law-a-name-that-changed-society> (accessed 4/9/15). Maria da Penha was interviewed for the Global Feminisms Project.

SC: And the women who take the courses here, who seek you out. Do they come with a goal? They're just interested, or they're trying to be leaders in a social movement, or why would someone take this course.

IAS: So the audience we reach through these courses, they are women who, in some way or another, are already in some social movement, but where a discussion of women's issues is missing, or they are looking to gain strength in this, to bring this theme to the places where they are already active – their social movement, whether at the university or at a school. They miss more openness about women's issues, and they want to strengthen their activism too. So there are many *compañeras* [comrades] who come with a story about sexism in the movements they participate in – that they can't reach certain positions or that they're not respected in the meetings. So they come to get stronger in these discussions. There are also those women who say, "I never participated but I always wanted to." So then there are girls, there are women, who say, "Well, I've always been a feminist but I didn't realize it." Like, I've always been uncomfortable with things inside my house, uncomfortable with things inside my family, but I have never found a space where I could think about this, where other people were thinking about this. So the ones who come to the course are of this profile – there's not going to be a SAARA worker there.

SC: Because they don't have time?

IAS: Because they don't have time to participate in a course like that. There are women leaders in the communities who are searching for support, who want to strengthen their local work, like what information to bring, what materials. But also they're looking for us to go there, to be acting there with them. It's rare for women who come and participate in a course not to ask to participate directly with us. They all bring this to their own activism. We also have a course for teachers, focused on educating professionals and preschool teachers, teachers of preschool, the course is a level that can be taught together with high school, like technical training, and this is where we focus on debating the issues of gender, prejudice, discriminations, inside the classroom to see how we can change this. So those are the professionals who participate, and there are also students. So these women too are very much in search of taking this to their everyday lives, to think about how to do this work in the classroom.

SC: And so they come by their own means, you don't give them a fellowship?

IAS: Oh, no. These are free courses, all our activities are free, and we pay for the transportation. Sometimes, depending, but if it's for lodging, or food – we always have this covered, we pay attention to that, because these are women who don't have money to spend this way.

SC: So they would come from a rural zone, so they have to travel here?

IAS: Yes.

SC: Interesting, so how do you see this kind of work, which is quite specific – it’s an NGO, it’s about the formation of leadership, it’s distributing information, it’s trying to help public polices through this education about information, if I understood well, more or less, everything that the organization does. How do you see this type of work right now in Brazil, within the context of the history of feminism in Brazil, women’s rights in Brazil? How do you see your own personal contribution and the organization, in this bigger context?

IAS: Taking the history of women’s rights in Brazil and the feminist battles and achievements, what we can see today is that we formally achieved many laws – we now have many guarantees, even though we don’t actually have all of them yet. The fight for the legalization of abortion is one of those that’s been here since the first feminists, and we haven’t achieved that yet. But yes, we are advancing in public policies and in laws. But it’s only that the rights achieved don’t equally reach all women. We have a formal guarantee, but in the reality of everyday life of most women, mainly the poor and the black women in Brazil, this doesn’t happen. So for instance, we have the Maria da Penha Law, which was an achievement after years and years of fighting in this movement, and it was very important for us, but it’s not implemented the way it should be. So for me the importance of this work is to help the women so they can have access, because sometimes they know their rights, and they know the law. But they try to access it, and they didn’t manage to. So then we say we’ll go together or we’ll send material or a letter to some institution and say, look this woman went there, this thing happened, why wasn’t she treated, or why wasn’t she heard. So I see very much here, trying to make those rights reach the biggest possible number of women. So that the women could in fact have access to what is guaranteed in the law.

SC: So you normally send women to the local police station in Rio de Janeiro. Are there bigger implications when the police station cannot defend these women’s rights? Do you help them to start a lawsuit?

IAS: We don’t get involved with the litigation. We send people to the right organizations, such as to the public defender’s office, or to other service organizations. And when there hasn’t been effective service, in a police station, for example, we file a complaint with the State Council for Women’s Rights [Conselho Estadual dos Direitos da Mulher (CEDIM)],¹³ file a complaint to the municipal ombudsman,¹⁴ to the agencies, to the political offices that should be enforcing this policy. Now one thing I always say is that we can look at things from two sides. We hear about cases of violence like this, and of complaints, and this happens a lot through the phone, or nowadays there’s the internet too, and there are the social networks. So the person who participated in one of our activities and friended us on Facebook, and after that she comes, saying my friend, my cousin, my colleague, so that’s more how it goes now. One very clear difference for me that I always mention is that before the Maria da Penha Law, we would receive many women saying, “I was beaten, I suffered

¹³ CEDIM was created in 1987 in the state of Rio as one of the first councils for women’s rights in the country. See http://www.cedim.rj.gov.br/historico_cedim.asp (accessed 1/6/15).

¹⁴ An ombudsman is an official in charge of representing public interests by investigating complaints against maladministration.

violence, my partner, my boyfriend, my husband assaulted me. What should I do? Where should I go?" Nowadays it's rare that a woman calls here asking where she should go. Normally she knows already that she has to go to the police station. So we assist them either because they didn't go, because they are afraid to make a claim, or because they have doubts about it – if perhaps it will be harmful, or what is going to happen. There are these worries, so she's not convinced yet that filing a complaint is the right way, or sometimes she just can't, or what we hear more and more often is, "I've already been to the police station, I've already filed a complaint. And I am still suffering violence." So we can think that there's been improvement in awareness, but it's clear how much the public policy is not doing what it should be. I think it wasn't even a month ago that we assisted a woman – Eleutéria took the lead in this case – the woman was a victim of violence and she couldn't file a complaint because the guy was connected to drug trafficking, so even if he was put in jail, she was going to suffer violence from other people in the ring. So she had to leave the place where she lived. And it took us almost a week, Eleutéria doing the most, of being in direct contact with the institutions, the coordinators, the secretaries, trying to find a shelter for her. It's very difficult for women to gain the benefits of public policies. In the end, she did. But it's not easy, and it would have been impossible for her to do that on her own. We don't know if she could reach the help. And it's a very difficult situation, because to go to a shelter is to leave all of your life behind. You are the one who has to leave, as if in jail, isolated, without work or study, no contact with family members. They can't even know where you are. So those are very hard situations, really. Extreme really.

SC: And one last question about the context of your work in the feminist movement with organizations that work with these issues of women. You have lots of international connections. How do you see the Brazil situation in the international context? Do you see Brazil as advanced in comparison to other countries, behind, moving at the same pace? What things are specific, what things do they have in common? How do you see this?

IAS: I wouldn't know how to answer this exactly. Our activism is more local and national. I mean, we have contacts with other organizations....

SC: Like the one that sponsored a project, from the U.S.?

IAS: Yes. And also in international meetings of feminists. But I don't know if I have an evaluation, or if we are better or worse. Well, I don't know, talking about what's going on in other countries makes me feel uncomfortable, because I don't feel I have this expertise. What I feel as a feminist, here in Brazil, becomes increasingly clear to me. It makes more and more sense over time. And then we can see what's happening with this movement in some other countries and not in others. For instance, Argentina has been able to obtain advancements on the issue of equal marriage; Uruguay got the legalization of abortion. From this perspective, we'd have to say that we are very behind. We feel a growing conservatism in society and in congress, mainly in relation to sexual rights and reproductive rights. It's a field in which we've been attacked, and it's hard to see any possibility in the short term of making progress here, and we're fighting so that we don't lose ground. We are in a very hard situation in this sense.

SC: So, this was my last thing – how you see the future, what you need to do. But you’ve already responded.

IAS: There is one thing, can I say something specific?

SC: Of course.

IAS: There’s a bill now, at the national congress – in Brazil, abortion is permitted in the case of rape, sexual violence, pregnancy resulting from sexual violence, or when the mother’s life is at risk. Recently the Supreme Court ruled that when the fetus doesn’t have a brain, abortion is admissible in that case as well. So, there are some proposed laws we’ve been struggling against, including a specific one that, now that we’re about to have elections, we know will probably be used [by candidates during their campaigns] – the Statute of the Unborn, which gives full protection to the unborn from conception, which interferes directly even in cases when the abortion is legal. There would be investigations, right? So if you’re pregnant and you lose the baby, you become a suspect. What did you do to lose the baby? Did you do anything that caused you to lose it? So the woman becomes a suspect. And there is another thing that we think is very serious – the possibility of a sort of stipend that a woman who becomes pregnant from a rape would receive. If she doesn’t do the legal abortion, she would get a stipend until the child reaches 18. So making this as if the only issue were a financial one, right? As if you didn’t want to have a pregnancy resulting from a rape just because of the financial issues. This is something so contradictory, so absurd – the money is going to be given by the dad, even though the dad is a rapist and should be in jail. So, you recognize the paternity of the rapist. We are at this juncture, it’s a very hard moment in this sense. In the last election, when Dilma¹⁵ was elected, there was an agenda that was used very strongly and now we’re getting ready that this probably is going to happen.

SC: Meaning now, in this election?

IAS: Yes.

SC: Oh, Iara. Thank you very much. We will stop here.

¹⁵ Dilma Rousseff is the current President of Brazil (2011-), now in her second term. She is a member of the Worker’s Party and was formerly Lula Da Silva’s Chief of Staff; she is the first female president of Brazil. She was reelected for a second term in 2014, but with significant controversy around economic issues and corruption.