

Young Visionaries

Cláudia Vasconcelos

20 years old

Peer Educator, Grupo Curumim
Brazil



Cláudia Vasconcelos is a 20-year-old peer educator with [Grupo Curumim](#), a feminist organization based in the city of Recife, in northeastern Brazil. Born and raised in Recife, Cláudia first began working with Curumim at the age of 13, when she participated in the organization's program for local adolescents designed to build self-esteem, provide vital information on sexual and reproductive health, and offer opportunities for young people to participate in the formation of local health policies. Today, Cláudia works with young people in the Cunhatã project part-time, and is a full-time secondary school student. The International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC) has supported Grupo Curumim since 1994, serving as the primary supporter of the Cunhatã project since its inception in 2001.

IWHC: What is your first memory as a young girl or young woman of a situation where you were personally aware of or effected by gender inequalities or a lack of rights for girls and women?

Cláudia Vasconcelos: I never had a happy moment in my childhood—all of my memories are of violence. I grew up in an environment where my mother was beaten by my father. Growing up, I never understood why those things were happening. I cried, I was afraid. I assumed that things like that were happening not just in my home, but in everyone's home. Once I grew up, I realized that this wasn't the case—which made me even more upset, because I wondered why it had to happen to my mother.

Maybe, for me, growing up in an environment like that strengthened my sense of struggle today. When I saw my mother getting beat up, I couldn't feel the pain that she felt, but I felt pain. And today I have a broader vision, because I understand the reality of a woman who is being abused but who can't do anything about it. I lived this at home. I know that lots of children like me are growing up in the same situation, and I want to change that.

IWHC: What are some of biggest challenges facing women and young people in Brazil today?

CV: There are many problems. First, access to health care—the young people we work with, and people our age in general, talk a lot about that. They won't go to the local clinic because a neighbor works there and will tell their mothers. Or they won't ask for condoms because the woman who works at the clinic will ask "How old are you? Why do you want condoms?" We hear that a lot.

There is also the problem of sexual violence against children and teenagers. Recently, during Carnival, I worked on a research project about violence against women in Recife. The project was in a police precinct which is specifically set up for women, to deal with women's concerns.

Women came to us with cases about their two- or three-year-old daughters who had been violated by their fathers-in-law or their fathers—it's a very common problem.

Another thing that many young people in Brazil face is the issue of unemployment. This week, in fact, there was a story on the front page of the newspaper about how unemployment is a challenge for young people. It's so frustrating: on the one hand, young people face pressure to find jobs, but they can't find jobs because they don't have experience. And they don't have experience because the system doesn't make room for them to acquire experience. The majority of young, black women in particular have jobs at local stores, selling things. They never have jobs that pay better and require higher qualifications—jobs that would allow them to pay for college tuition.

That relates to another problem, which is lack of access to education. Most of my friends don't even consider continuing their education or what to do when they finish school. They think, "I'm not going to get into college anyway, it's too competitive." And those of us who do think about it say, "You should try, study a little bit, make an effort." But it's hard. Because we come from public school, it's hard to give incentives to someone who has no expectations.

It's all these things, violence and violation of our rights... we are violated everywhere, as women, as young people, as black people.

IWHC: Why is the work of Curumim, and of IWHC, so important?

CV: The Coalition is important because it enables Curumim to do the work that makes Curumim important. And Curumim is important because it gets young people thinking about critical issues from a very early age, by exposing young people to many different ways of thinking and encouraging them to find the way that works best for them. In that way, Curumim is kind of like a liberal mother that presents her children with all the possibilities. This is so important, because it empowers young people.

Speaking from my own experience, and my friend Patricia's, we have changed so much since we started working with Curumim. When I started, I didn't speak up at all or understand anything. After I started, I came to understand things that I didn't before. I became a reference point at school, and the teachers asked me to give talks. On March 8th, International Women's Day, I even did a television interview. So many people came to me afterwards and said "I saw you on television," and I know they're thinking, "Wow, you are only 19 years old and you can already think and speak for yourself." It's very significant that Curumim has given me and other young people opportunities like this.

IWHC: Why is it important for you to work at Curumim?

CV: For me, it's important to work at Curumim so that I can do for others what Curumim has done for me—empower young people, and teach them what Sula and Claudinha—another educator, nurse and doctor—taught me. Young people come to us knowing very little...after six months they know much more, and after one year they are already teaching others. I always say that our work is like that of a little ant who forms a group, and then that group of ants goes out and forms new groups, and those others will form even more groups, so that maybe in 10 or 20 years we will have a more equal society.

IWHC: How will you realize the principles of sexual and reproductive health and rights in your own future?

CV: I have a lot of expectations for myself in the future, both personally and professionally. First, if I have children, I want to raise them in a way that diminishes gender differences and promotes equality, at least inside my own home. I want to study journalism, so that I can contribute to stopping censorship and restrictions on communication and information. I believe I'll never stop being a militant until the day I die. As Sula told me one day, when I was going through a hard time and trying to decide whether I would stay at Curumim or take a job elsewhere: "No matter what you do, or where you are, even if you are not here at Curumim, I'm sure you will keep fighting." I'll never forget that. And it's true. No matter where I am, I'm going to keep fighting to reduce inequalities.

IWHC: So if you succeed in all this—if all people can enjoy their sexual and reproductive health and rights—what is the world going to look like?

CV: The world will be wonderful, because it won't have rights violations and people will be respected no matter their color, sexual orientation, or what they decide to do with their lives. It will be a society with less violence—because I believe that violence comes from inequality. All people will be educated, so that they know about their rights and can demand that those in power fulfill their commitments to good education and good health care. That is what all of us at Curumim hope for, and what I hope to see one day. I feel very happy to have been able to see progress already, as with the 2006 [Maria da Penha law](#), for example, which increases protection for women who experience violence. The law allows for an aggressor to be arrested not only in the act of committing an offence, but also preventively, if the aggressor is determined to be a threat to a victim's life. The law also calls for gender-based crimes against women to be judged in special courts. I was part of the fight for this law to be passed, and I was able to celebrate that victory. I believe that in the future, I'll be an old lady still celebrating such victories.