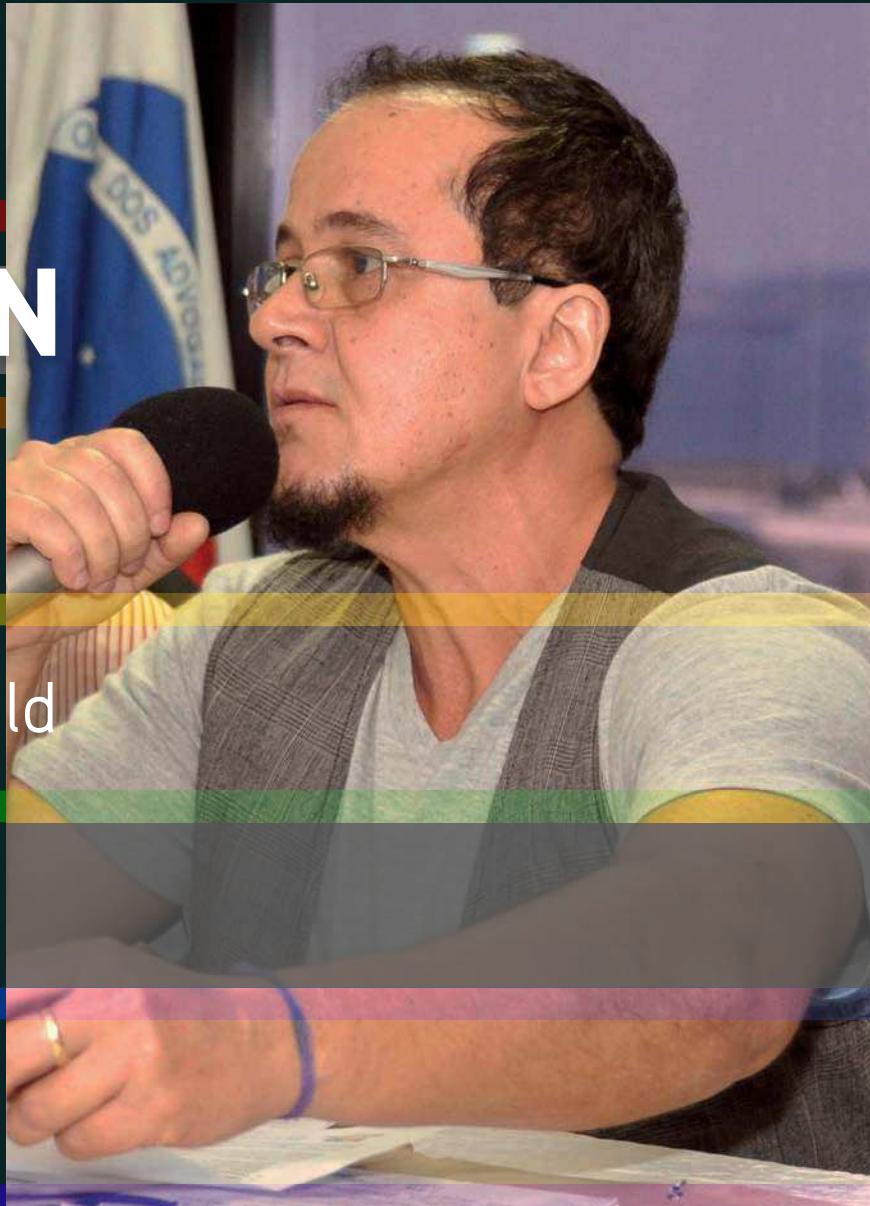


# SIMON

51 years old

Activist



## **SIMON IS AN ANTHROPOLOGIST AND TRANS ACTIVIST.**

At the end of 2015 he graduated from the first Micro Rainbow Brazil entrepreneurship course. In his opinion, as a former student and LGBT militant, taking the course broadens horizons and “breathes new life into the LGBT community”, opening doors for autonomy and the creation of important spaces of personal and economic self-management.

## “THAT'S WHAT I COULD BE!”

Simon's story is particularly beautiful and revealing. It exposes the cruelty of the framework of gender in the process of socialisation, which is so conditioned by stereotypes, scientific “truths” and control over bodies. Our society classifies, frames, pathologizes and punishes, even if without legal support, people who do not express themselves according to the gender attributed to them at birth: *“Before the transition, everything I did was misunderstood. All of my expression was perceived as wrong. Everything was reprehensible... This is a daily humiliation; a form of psychological suffering that makes social interaction totally unappealing”.*

It is also a story of transition overcoming social constraints that restricted him at every gesture, at every moment. Simon was already a university professor and researcher when he first made contact with the trans world in all its richness. This world would quickly become part of his experience as a person, professional and activist: *“The day I discovered that there was such a thing as a trans person, I cried. I thought, ‘Guys, that's it! That's what I could be!'”*.

## “BIOGRAPHICAL RUPTURE”

In this way, Simon began his process of “biographical rupture”, a term which he uses to define his transition. After a seven-year period of depression and complete social isolation, he talked about the subject with a friend, who invited him to

the National Meeting of Transvestites and Transgender People Who Fight Against AIDS (ENTLAIDS). There he met a trans man for the first time, and was advised to go to the Pedro Ernesto University Hospital to learn about the transition process offered by *Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS)*, Brazil's national public health system. At the time, he did not know that Brazil's public health system offered this service, and was already preparing to go to the United States if necessary. He began his transition immediately, and when he obtained the medical report that authorises hormone therapy, he changed his clothes, changed his name, and re-introduced himself to the world as Simon.

*“I found peace after I made the transition. There are people who say, ‘the life of a trans person is problematic’. For me, life as a trans person has solved a lot of issues”.*

Even with this optimistic and liberating perception, Simon recognises that the world he encountered after transition was the same as before, with its conservatism and limitations. He recounts the difficulties he faced in being recognised in his new existence at various levels, from having to be reintroduced to people to enduring serious expressions of transphobia: *“Friends, relatives, neighbours, everyone has to go through their own ‘transition’ as well”*.

The transition also created the need to be re-socialised into the masculine world and to define what kind of man he

wanted to be. He realised that he did not feel the need to prove his masculinity through physical strength, sexual competitiveness, objectification of women and other macho behaviours. In this sense, he had difficult experiences in the workplace, when revealing his trans status provoked bizarre and even violent reactions. Close friends who used to share their feelings and secrets with him felt “betrayed” when they discovered that he is trans, and even threatened him with physical assault.

## ACTIVISM AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Even the misfortunes in his story were harnessed by Simon in an intelligent and productive way. Beyond experiencing the social relevance of this subject on his own skin, he also perceived its incredible investigative potential as an intellectual. So he decided to pursue postgraduate studies in gender and sexuality, articulating his knowledge and activism as a lecturer in the health sector. His lectures address the issue of gender expression, which encompasses a large number of people who suffer from a supposed discrepancy between their gender condition and the social expressions attributed to it, including cisgender individuals such as “effeminate” men and “masculine” women:

***“My body is a tool of expression of my culture, which I perfect and modify. The use of techniques, instruments, the use of language,***

***all of this is part of human nature. Nobody is dominated by reproductive organs, this does not determine gender expression. We have chemistry, we suffer, we love, we have preferences... we feel things we cannot explain! You can't reduce the human being to a set of organs and parts as if he were a piece of mechanical equipment, an automobile. We're more than that”.***

Through this journey, Simon also understood that the formal labour market was no longer for him. Now it was time to step up and establish a business, always remaining attuned to trans issues. This is how he had the idea to invest in the development of penile prosthetic devices for trans men, with the objective of bringing more comfort and quality of life to basic activities such as using the bathroom and engaging in sexual intercourse: *“As an entrepreneur, what I want to do is to improve the lives of my peers. I want to promote well-being in this population because I am also part of it”*. Using the bathroom is a particularly sensitive issue for trans people in general, and many trans men end up not urinating during the entire working day because the bathrooms do not have adequate privacy, exposing them to embarrassment and violence.

In order to acquire the skills needed to put his idea into practice, Simon enrolled in the first Micro Rainbow Brazil's entrepreneurship course. His business plan, which he developed and defended

as the final step in the course, was crucial in guiding his entrepreneurial experience. He compares his plan with an academic research proposal, and is very proud of its outcome:

***"The business plan broadens your horizon, you are constructing your business subjectively, which gives you a basis to work from later, giving you an idea of your limits, possibilities... it gives you grounding. I feel like I have a business because I have a business plan, even though I depend on financing to carry it out. But I already have a [legally established] firm, a business tax number, everything".***

Currently Simon is investing in improving his product prototype, and the biggest barrier to launching it in the market has been accessing microcredit to start production and structure the business. He is trying to use his FGTS<sup>8</sup> for this, but since it is registered under his birth name, he has faced great difficulties in accessing it. However, this does not discourage him because he believes in the quality of his product and its competitive edge in relation to others on the national market. The confidence that the course instilled in him encourages him to continue as an entrepreneur:

***"This course was important for me because it stitched everything together, it tied together what I want to do, who I'm going to sell it to, what's the competitive difference of my product. It helps you to act as a real entrepreneur, to know the importance of planning, to have a total vision of the business. Also, you're in the midst of LGBT people, you feel normal, equal, empathetic... you don't expect prejudice from anyone. I think it's great; I loved taking this course, really!".***

As an activist, Simon believes in the potential of entrepreneurship to contribute to freeing the LGBT community from excluding and exploitative working conditions. He highlights the role of the project in LGBT socioeconomic inclusion:

***"We need entrepreneurs in Brazil. The boss gets his or her way, and if you're your own boss, you can be whatever you want, no one will complain. So I think this course is important for that, to open people's eyes to autonomy, to financial and personal self-management, to reconsider your choices, to believe in yourself, to make plans, to produce something".***

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<sup>8</sup> The Fundo de Garantia do Tempo e Serviço, also known as FGTS, is a resource for the government and an assistance fund for workers. Both employees and employers contribute to the fund. With FGTS a worker accumulates financial assets that can be withdrawn in certain circumstances.

Simon's narrative personifies the need to reinvent oneself, articulating several fronts of resistance and

empowerment in order to subvert, in a creative and innovative way, the values that underlie gender oppression in our society. Although he has not been able to implement

his business plan because of financial issues, he has made entrepreneurship a form of activism, and his experience with Micro Rainbow International is part of that. Bravo! ■

## OTHER ENTREPRENEURS FROM MICRO RAINBOW BRAZIL

