

# THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF BRAZILIAN IMMIGRANTS IN ROME <sup>1</sup>

Name of the author: Isabela Cabral Félix de Sousa

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Migration is no longer seen only as a linear process but one related to transnational orientations (Monkman, 1999; Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1992) because some migrating populations keep strong ties and do return, sporadically or for good, to their countries of origin. Immigrants' educational, health and working conditions are sometimes compared to non-immigrants (Ali, 2002; Bassanezi & Bogus, 1998; Ogbu, 1987; Pérez, 2002). Even so, these comparisons tend to disregard the definitions of those who migrate.

In the present capitalist social order, conditions to immigration have recently worsened or restricted. In countries of destination, not only job contracts are becoming increasingly frail but also health and educational benefits are more likely to be difficult to obtain, particularly to the undocumented immigrants. Moreover, changes in women's roles and globalization in countries, of origin and of destination, increasingly lead more women to migrate. The female modern trend on

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migration needs to be more understood. Last but not least, Sutton (1992) argues that there is a need to produce a more gendered perspective of transnational migration.

Despite the difficulties migrants suffer, there are associations attempting to empower both women and migrating populations in general. It was thus hypothesized that there were barriers faced by immigrants that could be attenuated and even removed when they try to associate with other people informally or even by taking part in institutional activities created by them and interested in their welfare. Therefore, this study focused on the social integration of Brazilian women living in Rome, considering that their associationism was somewhat related to their empowerment.

It is also hypothesized that migration may to some extent improve the social condition of women. According to Batliwala (1994), "Through empowerment, women gain access to new worlds of knowledge and can begin to make new, informed choices in both their personal and their public lives" (p.132). In the discourse of women's empowerment, stands the right of women to control their own bodies. As a feminist principle, this notion relates to women's sexual and reproductive autonomy as well as their integrity as physical persons (Dixon-Mueller, 1993). Thus, this study also considered women's reproductive health.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that women's empowerment is not an easy task to accomplish. Sousa (2001) demonstrates how health professionals' concepts about poor women may undermine the empowerment of their client

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population. Therefore, it is important to continue to research women's empowerment especially on tough conditions, such as the one experienced by migrating populations. Considering the point of view of immigrant women, more appropriate social measures can be taken in their favor by institutions of the country of origin and destination.

#### BRAZILIAN IMMIGRATION TO ITALY

According to Bógus (1995), Italy is the second destination selected by Brazilian immigrants in Europe, after Portugal. By December 2002, it was estimated that Brazilians in Italy were 20.804, which placed them at the 22 position of the 30 communities with major presence of immigrants in Italy (CARITAS ROMA, 2003). D'Angelo (2004) affirmed that in this same period in Italy, the communities with more Brazilians were Rome (4.381) followed by Milano (3.032) and by Torino (1.153).

The proportion of Brazilian men to women in the year 2001 indicates a prevalence of women since their presence related to 65, 4% of the total (CARITAS ROMA, 2002). Thus, studying Brazilian immigration in Italy, like others communities with more females than males, is essential to understand this modern trend on migration and gender relations, where more women than men move from an underdeveloped country towards a developed one.

Bógus and Bassanezi (2001) emphasize that both documented and undocumented Brazilian immigrants are subjected to prejudice and discrimination in Italy. As usual, both prejudice and discrimination have marked encounters with

cultural differences. As most Brazilians do not have the same cultural apparatus and connections of the Italians, they may face barriers in the school system, in the health care system and in the acquisition of respectful employment. While their presence is acknowledged, it was lacking information on their experiences to determine if there were in fact structural barriers and, if so, of what nature. Data that is relevant needed to encompass the immigrants' framework of reference such as their views on the conditions of their present life.

## METHODOLOGY

The research design selected is qualitative, using ethnographic techniques such as informal conversations and planned interviews. In field settings, it is crucial to understand a contextual situation surrounding what would be evaluated - circumstances for which qualitative designs are quite suitable. The context includes type of participants, localities, and different occasions and can interact in unique ways.

The interviews used have closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions were selected from a comprehensive questionnaire designed at the Department of Demography of La Sapienza and used in other previous survey researches with other communities of immigrants living in Rome (Bonifazi, C.; Caruso, M.G.; Conti, C. & Strozza, S., 2003). The open ended questions were generated in this research to address women's personal and reproductive health issues and the profile of men present at the gathering places.

The strategy for selecting the Brazilian immigrant followed the criteria of

taking part in social activities of the gathering sites where Brazilians meet, arrange interview with them and ask for other contacts. Thus, the data was gathered not only from the interviews, but also from the field work notes of all informal conversation with both women and men present at meeting localities.

The issues addressed during the interviews with the immigrant women were related to their: present and past educational and work activities in the country of origin and settlement; their perceptions about their reproductive health status; opinions of the institutions they have related to in Rome; and their participation in social networks that led them and others to immigrate. These questions were anonymous and followed ethical procedures, given the fact that both questions regarding immigration status and reproductive health may cause embarrassment.

The open-ended questions pertaining the interviews with men were related to their age, educational background, work activities in Brazil and Italy, birthplace, permanence in Italy, reason to select Italy as a country for migration and if there was any influential friend or family member who was instrumental in this process.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### *Social and demographic data*

The data has been collected from oral interviews and through fieldwork notes regarding observations at selected social sites where Brazilians meet in Rome. The places selected were the Brazilian consulate and embassy, an art gallery, a pizzeria, two churches, two restaurants, one bar and a Brazilian association for women. From December 2003 to August 2004, in depth interviews were conducted

with 46 women and brief interviews with 34 men. Still, non-standardized interviews were settled with 3 key persons that were referred by many Brazilians as developing active roles in their social integration in Rome. One is a woman who is the president of the Association for Brazilian women. She is originally from the Northeast Brazil and lived in other European countries before going to Rome where she founded the organization. She also explained to be the first person in her original family to earn a university degree and to have a personal past of political activities in Brazil. The other key person is a priest who despite not being Brazilian has lived in the country and loves it. This priest not only conducts masses in Portuguese but also helps Brazilian in their spiritual and material needs. Finally, the third key person is another woman born at the Brazilian Southeast and who always worked with volunteer activities, both in Brazil and Italy. In Rome, she has had, for 15 years, an active volunteer role of gathering Brazilians and trying to help them meet basic needs, such as job and housing. She was the first person to immigrate from her own family and helped to bring other 35 family members.

The studied women were born in 13 different Brazilian States and in the United States of America. The interviewed men were born in 11 Brazilian States. As Table 1 shows, while the Southeast is the birthplace of most Brazilians interviewed, the North is the region with less of them. In reality, many women had already migrated to other Brazilian regions prior to their migration to Italy. Hence, as table 2 shows the majority of interviewed women (35 of them) had migrated at least one time prior to their present migration experience to Rome. While more than half of them had migrated inside Brazil, a few had migrated to other countries as well.

Table 1 – States and country where Brazilian immigrants were born

	State or country	Number of women	Number of men	Total
<b>North</b>	Pará	01	02	03
<b>Northeast</b>	Ceará	-	01	01
<b>Northeast</b>	Maranhão	01	-	01
<b>Northeast</b>	Paraíba	01	-	01
<b>Northeast</b>	Pernambuco	05	-	05
<b>Northeast</b>	Bahia	08	01	09
<b>Midwest</b>	Mato Grosso	02	03	05
<b>Midwest</b>	Goiás	04	04	08
<b>Southeast</b>	São Paulo	04	06	10
<b>Southeast</b>	Rio de Janeiro	04	04	08
<b>Southeast</b>	Minas Gerais	05	04	09
<b>South</b>	Paraná	05	06	11
<b>South</b>	Santa Catarina	01	01	02
<b>South</b>	Rio Grande do Sul	04	02	06
<b>USA</b>		01	-	01
<b>TOTAL</b>		46	34	80

Table 2 – Presence of previous migration experience

Former internal migration	28
Former international migration	07
1 <sup>st</sup> migration experience is Italy	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>46</b>

Analyzing table 3, showing the last place of residence of women before arriving in Rome and comparing it with table 1, which describes their birthplace, it is seen a different picture. While the Southeast and the Midwest increased in number of immigrants, the Northeast and the South decreased. At least one explanation can be found for the growth of the Midwest region regarding the Brazilian capital, Brasília. This city, created in the sixties has been a pole of internal migration. In this study, five women living there have immigrated to Rome (one as employee and the other four as domestic servants for the employees) of the Brazilian consulate and embassy. Therefore, these national circumstances (the construction of Brasília, Brazilian employees' abroad) have acted as pull and push factors that led to both internal and international migration.

Table 3 – Place of residence before arriving in Rome

	State or country	Number of women
<b>North</b>	Rondonia	01
<b>Northeast</b>	Pernambuco	02
<b>Northeast</b>	Bahia	04
<b>Midwest</b>	Mato Grosso	01
<b>Midwest</b>	Goiás	05
<b>Midwest</b>	Brasília, DF	07
<b>Southeast</b>	Espírito Santo	01
<b>Southeast</b>	São Paulo	08
<b>Southeast</b>	Rio de Janeiro	05
<b>Southeast</b>	Minas Gerais	02
<b>South</b>	Paraná	04
<b>South</b>	Santa Catarina	01
<b>South</b>	Rio Grande do Sul	03
<b>Portugal</b>		01
<b>USA</b>		01
<b>TOTAL</b>		46

The time range that Brazilians have been living in Rome varies from 6 months to 22 years. As table 4 evinces, the last three years (2001 to 2004) concentrate the vast majority of those interviewed, 51 of them. This may not only reflect the growth of new arrivals but also the fact that the more recent immigrants actively participate in social activities in order to share experiences and to find friendship, jobs and housing arrangements.

Table 4 – Time of presence in Italy

Range of years	Women	Men
2003-2004	10	11
2001-2002	16	14
1999-2000	05	01
1993-1998	06	03
1987-1992	07	02
1982-1986	02	03
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>34</b>

The age range of the studied Brazilians varies from 19 to 59 years old. Table 5 indicates that it is possible that men tend to immigrate younger than women do, what should be investigated in further studies.



Table 5 – Age range of Brazilian immigrants

	Women	Men
19-24	-	08
25-29	08	08
30-34	10	04
35-39	13	07
40-44	06	02
45-49	06	03
50-54	01	02
55-59	02	-
TOTAL	46	34

Evaluating table 6, it is evinced that most studied women were single (25 of them) and that slightly over one third had a male partner (17 of them). Among those who had Italian partners, 12 were officially married.

Table 6 – Civil status of interviewed women

Single	25
Officially married with Italians	11
Officially married with a German	01
Italian male partner	03
Brazilian male partner	02
Separated	03
Widowed	01
Total	46

Concerning the legal status of women in Rome, table 7 demonstrates that most are legal since only 10 do not hold a valid permission to stay and 3 are waiting for documentation. Not all of the permissions accurately indicate women's activities. For example, one 31 years old woman born at Brazilian South had a permission to work as a domestic servant to the mother of her ex Italian partner, and instead of that, worked as a hairdresser. Still, in other circumstance the study permission of another Brazilian 37 years old and also from the South of Brazil, no longer reflected this activity, since she began to work on tourism. Finally, a work change may lead immigrants to illegality. A 48 years old domestic servant, originally from the Brazilian Northeast migrated to Rome to serve Brazilian

diplomats, but decided instead to change her job and as a result lost her legal permission to stay.

Table 7 – Legal status of interviewed women

Italian citizenship	05
Valid stay for family reunion	09
Waiting documentation for family reunion	02
Waiting documentation for work	01
Valid stay for work	10
Valid stay for study	02
Valid stay for religion	03
Valid stay due to diplomatic agreement	04
Absence of a valid permission to stay	10
Total	46

Although marriage with an Italian national is generally expected by the immigrant women to ease the bureaucratic endeavors they have to pursue in Italy, two married women to Italians were instead uneasy for having to wait documentation. On the other hand, some single women reported having never been illegal due to their regular labor activities. Maternity also seems to simplify bureaucratic procedures. A 33 years old woman born the Brazilian Northeast, not married to her Italian partner but with a child by him, reported that her married friends used to have more difficulty to obtain a legal stay in Italy (*permesso di soggiorno*) than she had. She even showed me her documents from the Italian government granting her unlimited stay in Italy in order to take care of her child.

As it can be concluded from table 8, the majority of the interviewed women did not have children (35 of them), and as result their fertility rate is far below the Brazilian national rate, which is above the replacement level. But this is not surprising given the fact that most of the studied women were single and those who have children may find more difficulty to migrate with their offspring or to provide for their care in the home country. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen to

what extent personal and social conditions will lead this fertility rate to change since the majority (37 of them) are in their reproductive years and may still bear children.

Table 8 – Number of children and fertility rate

	Women interviewed
Childless	35
1 child	04
2 children	01
3 children	04
4 children	02
Total	46
Fertility rate	0.56

In regard to their educational background displayed in table 9, 7 women have not finished high school, 20 women completed high school and 19 women hold university diplomas. Almost all university diplomas were earned in Brazil with the exception of one achieved in Italy and another in the Dominican Republic. Considering the educational background of the studied men, most of them had high school education and their diplomas were all earned in Brazil. Since Brazilian women tend to study more than men in all levels of education, it would not be surprising to encounter more educational attainment among women. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that not only were fewer men in this sample, but 8 of them migrated prior to have enough age to finish a university degree.

Table 9 – Educational background of Brazilians immigrants

	Women	Men	TOTAL
Elementary School	02	02	04
Junior High School	05	01	06
High School	20	25	45
University degrees	19	06	25

More than half of the Brazilian interviewed women, 30 of them, took Italian language courses in Rome. Many of the respondents complained that their workload did not allow them to either initiate or continue studying Italian. Other 11 women had study in Italy or were still enrolled in professional and academic education while they worked. Only 2 females, now with Italian citizenship, studied the Italian language in Brazil. Although it could be promising the number of women who study or had studied Italian in Rome, their attendance tend to be only a few months. Further, it is extremely low the number of women who took Italian language courses in Brazil. This may be associated with the lack of money to study languages since courses are often private, Italian's language similarity to Portuguese, and to some extent, the absence of anticipatory socialization in regard to the need of language skills for the migration process. Comparisons with men cannot be made because the study of the Italian language was not asked to them during the brief interviews. Yet, 1 male who holds now dual citizenship have reported that becoming an Italian national took him 9 years and included studying Italian in Brazil.

Taking into account the presence of Italian ancestry, 6 women and 9 men reported to have it. Besides, 5 women and 4 men declared to hold the Italian citizenship. Concerning only the women, the citizenship of 3 of them was granted due to their marriage with Italians, and of 2 because they proved their Italian ancestry. Bearing in mind those who have Italian ancestry, it was never mentioned any of the Italian government actions for fostering the Italian language and culture in Brazil.

### *Brazilian's work activities in Rome*

Considering Brazilian women work activities in Rome, all women reported to be working. Most of their activities were primarily in the third sector and most women (38 of them) worked every weekday, while the other 8 reported that their work was sporadic. Still, 2 of them, working for the Brazilian association for women and with university degrees, complained the lack of possibilities in their profession in Rome. Other women explained that only in terms of money they might be better off in Rome, but they were fulfilling work under their abilities. Yet, a few managed to have related and sporadic work activities. Some women worked in more than one job. The first work activity most reported (by 22 women) was related to domestic service such as cleaning and cooking. The other activities in second place, performed each one by 11 women, were either related to the care of children or services at bar and restaurants. However, it is important to emphasize, that while 4 owners developed these activities, other 7 women worked as employees, either as cooks or waiters. And surprisingly the care of old people only appeared as a sporadic work and was done by 5 women. Furthermore, there were also 7 women who mentioned to be working as volunteers in social activities that involved other Brazilian and immigrant women. Among them, 3 were nuns and the other 4 reported combining volunteer activities with paid ones. Other women stated that they were working at a variety of professions such as: commerce, beauty care, marketing, journalism, translation, tourism, chancellery service and teaching.

Table 10 – Work activities performed by women

	Every weekday activity	Sporadic activity	Total
Domestic service	20	02	22
Care of children	11	-	11
Restaurant	06	05	11
Care of old persons	-	05	05
Volunteer	01	06	07
Commerce	02	01	03
Beauty care	01	02	03
Marketing	01	01	02
Journalism	01	-	01
Translation	-	02	02
Tourism	02	1	03
Chancellery	01	-	01
Teaching	-	02	02

Note: In this table, categories are not excluding since some women develop more than one activity.

In regard to the studied Brazilian men, almost one fourth of them (9) reported being unemployed in Italy. Among the workers, 4 of them are musicians, 3 employees in restaurants, 2 laborers in civil construction, 2 priests, 2 journalists, 1 taking care of an old person, 1 real state dealer, 1 technical of electricity, 1 carpenter, 1 seller, 1 baker, 1 farmer, 1 assistant to farming, 1 laborer in a factory and 1 gatekeeper in a hotel. Men's labor activities, like those of women, can also be characterized as developing for the most part in the third sector.

#### *Working conditions and social integration*

When women were asked to compare their working conditions in Italy to the one they had in Brazil, as shown on Table 11, only a little more than half of them declared that, on the whole, they were having a better work life in Rome. An issue to the social integration of women is their greater insertion in the labor market as performing household assistance. While this kind of job has been argued as offering stability to women in the initial steps of their migration process, it has been also argued to hamper in the long run their professional mobility and social

integration (Natale and Strozza, 1997). In fact, in this study a few women who hold university degrees and perform these activities were discontent for being unable to develop work activities related to their level of education and having only domestic activities as gainful work perspective.

The forms household assistance may assume are perceived differently by women and influence in their level of job satisfaction. Thus, to have a live out position was clearly seen as more autonomous than having a live-in position. For example, a 38 years old woman holding a university degree, originally from the Brazilian Northeast, reported: "Unfortunately I will have to move into a live-in position. I prefer to work as a live-out, have my apartment, but I was dismissed and there are more offers for live-in positions". It is important to note that as live-out position, this woman's living conditions were not easy. Her living arrangements included other 11 people from other nationalities and one of her companions was recently stolen by one of her roommates.

Additionally, the respondents' level of satisfaction seems to largely depend on their previous perspective back home as well as the time they had been in Italy. Clearly, the improved financial gain was a matter of happiness for those who performed domestic activities in Brazil and were doing the same in Rome. Further, for those who were new arrivals and confronted with unemployment previous to immigrating, being in Italy with a domestic job was also defined as a matter of fortune. A few women noticed not only a decrease in the demand for domestic service jobs but also a decline in the salary offers in Rome. Despite that, the key woman, who tries to help Brazilians in their job demand, told me she can find in a matter of 1 to 2 weeks a domestic service job for a woman but not for a man. Thus,

it is not surprising that from the point of view of a few Brazilian men interviewed, Brazilian women are envied in Italy for having more job prospects than they do.

Table 11 – Women’s self perceived changes of working conditions in Rome compared to Brazil

	Better	Equal	Worse	TOTAL
As a whole	26	08	12	46
Earnings	29	09	08	46
Security at work	17	20	09	46
Physical tiredness	09	09	28	46
Personal satisfaction	27	08	11	46

In terms of gender issues and unemployment, perhaps one of the most important debates, observed in the gathering place of a bar, involved 5 men who agreed to envy Brazilian women in Italy for having more job opportunities. During this debate, one of them, a 34 year old Brazilian man, who used to repair cars in a city of the Brazilian Midwest for more than a decade, told the group how difficult it was for him to start working in the only job available he found, which was to take care of an old person in Rome. He concluded by saying that it was not only a matter of the employers having prejudice against men, but immigrants themselves had notions of masculinity impeding them to find jobs. However, this Brazilian said that he was very happy to have overcome his initial prejudice. In another interview, a male reported how unemployment has led him to increase his debts to the extent that he regretted decided to come to Italy and joked that sometimes he wished to be a woman to find any job in Italy.

#### *Friendship and social integration*

The friendship issue was also investigated considering the free time of the migrant women. As expected, they had preference to associate with friends from



Brazil. It is important to remember that many women do not have family members around and cannot make this option. An issue that may be of concern is the women who favor to be alone but do not find joy in this way, particularly those who complained of their loneliness. Still, it seems that the respondents as much choose associating with Italians and other nationals. Some women expressed desire as well as difficulty in making friends with Italians and, on the other hand, feeling more at ease to make friends with nationals from other countries.

Table 12 – Indication of social integration by gathering options at free time

	1 <sup>st</sup> place	2 <sup>nd</sup> place	TOTAL
Alone	08	12	20
Family members	10	05	15
Brazilians	18	10	28
Italians	05	09	14
Other Nationals	05	10	15
TOTAL	46	46	92

All women maintain international telephone contact with their family members and friends living in Brazil. Only one woman said she never calls her family but only her friends. In general, they tend to receive fewer calls than they call their family members and friends, due to the higher cost of international telephone in Brazil and the inferior financial conditions of family members in Brazil.

Table 13 – Frequency of international telephone contacts with Brazil

	Number of women
Every week	35
Few times a month	06
Once a month	05
TOTAL	46

Half of the women indicated their willingness to return home after some years in Rome. During this study, 4 of them did return home and 2 discussed in length the pros and cons that they might undergo eventually moving back. However, there

are still few women undecided or willing to stay in Italy, or even envisioning living in another country. This planning is related to their migration project and do not exactly match their perceived social integration, since many women perceive themselves as having a good social integration and even so, plan to return. Still, this perceived social integration is the extent to which women feel adapted, even though they may not present features defined as being socially integrated such as having friendship with Italians or other nationals. For instance, a woman said she was very well socially integrated, because she felt well having a job. Yet, this woman had no free time to cultivate friends, overwhelmed by work and the responsibility of taking care alone of her children.

Table 14 – Presence or absence of future migration project

	Number of women
Plan to return to Brazil	19
Actually returned to Brazil	04
Do not plan to return, want to stay in Italy	08
Want to live in other country	07
Do not know	08
TOTAL	46

Table 15 – Self perceived social integration

Good	30
Bad	05
More or less	11
TOTAL	46

Perhaps one of the issues of more concern to the social integration of the studied women is their loneliness. While many do not necessarily feel lonely and are quite happy with the lives they are leading, it should not be neglected their feeling of uneasiness in the host society and what they perceive as losing, like a better marriage prospect. For instance, a 37 years old woman from the Brazilian Southeast told me that it has been very difficult for her to find a boyfriend in Italy

and she wants to marry. In fact, even though most might still have children for being in their reproductive years, it is unclear whether the migration process will or not diminish their marriage and childbearing prospects.

It is important to stress that one of the strengths to overcome loneliness seems to originate from the concrete benefits perceived as being offered by the host society, such as social welfare. For example, as a 44 year old woman from Brazilian Midwest said: "I want to age in Italy because I am sure that if I manage to become legal I will have more social benefits here in long run than in Brazil". This same woman cried talking about how she missed her family members.

Nevertheless, even when the legal conditions of migration can be considered good, women may still experience loneliness. In other words, not only being single and undocumented may be synonymous of feeling lonely. A 35 years old woman, coming from the Brazilian Southeast, married to an Italian and already with the Italian citizenship, explained how she felt depressed in Rome and identifies this as common trend among other girl friends in similar situation. This woman said that her life was quite difficult and lacked autonomy, since she had to inhabit not only with her husband but also with her parents in law.

#### *Associationism of Brazilian women*

The associationism of these women was analyzed taking into account forms of participation they choose to belong or to avoid. As tables 16 and 17 indicate, the majority of women take part in some institutional activity and the religious institutions tend to be selected by more than half of these women. It can be appointed the great role religious institutions do play in leading some women to

their social integration. Probably these institutions' role is fostered by the fact of being approachable when women have the day off. Zarembka's (2004) asserts that religious organizations tend to be the first institution searched by foreigner domestic women in the United States, due to the fact that it opens on Sundays. In this study, 2 women emphasized that they were taking part of religious institutions in a manner they never did in Brazil, because they felt lonely and needed to socialize.

At any case, some do not only take part in religious celebrations but also take advantage of free Italian language courses and cheap festivities. In some cases, it was even reported by the respondents that they have had psychological support and assistance in finding jobs, documentation procedures, and health information. Furthermore, the priest, who has an active role at the Brazilian community, mentioned the assistance in paying return trips for those not socially adapted. Finally, it was often stressed among those who participate in associations, that religious ones do a lot, but some times cannot help in what immigrants need the most which was their legal documentation.

Table 16 – Presence or absence of associationism among women

Presence of associationism	34
Absence of associationism	12
TOTAL	46

Table 17 – Types of associations selected by women

Religious	30
Syndicalism	05
Leisure	11
Cultural	15
Sport	11
Political	05
Association for Brazilian women	03

Note: In this table, categories are not excluding

The Brazilian association for women (*Associazione delle Donne Brasiliani in Italia-ADBI*) was founded in 1993. Since its foundation, it had been involved in a variety of activities such as: guidance in reproductive health issues like AIDS, DSTs and birth delivery; counseling women suffering from cultural shock; legal orientation; and educational activities to both women and children in order to promote Brazilian language and culture. The rationale grounding the activities is that immigrants do not lose their cultural identity while integrating into the Italian culture.

It is important to note that the president of the association for Brazilian women contended that the majority of women who search this association are those who hold university diploma. Indeed, among those interviewed the 3 respondents who have participated at ADBI hold this diploma.

Despite the benefits women may gain taking part of associations, there are important reasons given by a few women who do not participate. As table 18 demonstrates these included lack of time, interest, knowledge, belief and opportunity. Still, 4 women explained that what helped were not associations but friendship. Finally, 1 woman expressed fear for participating and then being caught because she was undocumented.

Table 18 – Reasons women gave for not taking part of associations

Lack of time	12
Lack of interest	07
Lack of knowledge about them	05
Lack of belief in them	04
Lack of opportunity	03
Friendship is what help	04
Fear	01

Note: In this table, categories are not excluding

### *Brazilian women's use of the health system*

The majority of Brazilians, as indicated in Table 19 uses the Italian health system. Yet, it is important to stress that a few women (10) did not look for health assistance in Italy for lack of time or fear of using an unfamiliar health system.

Table 19 – Number of women using the Italian health system

Use the health system	36
Do not use the health system	10
TOTAL	46

The public Italian health system is clearly used by the majority of Brazilians, like shown in Table 20. The private Italian health system was reported to be only used as an alternative option when the public one did not satisfy their needs. And only very few women had utilized the health system provided by volunteers associations dealing with immigrants.

Table 20 – Types of Italian health system used by women

Public health system	35
Private health system	18
Volunteer association	03

Note: In this table, categories are not excluding

Even though it was not asked, an issue that emerged among 9 of the respondents was their concrete use or symbolic reference to the Brazilian health system. These women reported that their lack of familiarity with the Italian medical system and their lack of medical references were factors that led them to continue searching for health assistance in Brazil by phone or when they returned for vacation. It is important to note that not always the returning plans were realistic. Moreover, 2 women even regretted the operation procedures they had undergone in Brazil, but explained they did not feel at ease to perform them in Rome. Only the higher dental cost in Rome, as compared to Brazil, was referred as a reason to

search dental assistance back home. Therefore, these women's reliance on a health system at the original society can be seen as a sign of a consequence of a transnational orientation to the migration process. In other words, they tried to benefit from both societies.

Considering issues related to reproductive health, only 2 women had contacted in Italy with organizations that were trying to bring women's awareness. In regard to the relationship women had with their male partners, 14 women declared to have a good relationship in which they freely discussed their sexuality. These women also counted on their partners to be accompanied to medical procedures. However, 3 women stated that they did not discuss, and did not feel at ease to talk about sexuality or medical issues with their partners. One of these women, a 33 years old born in the Brazilian Northeast, explained how difficult it was to raise their child, because her partner did not want to take into consideration any of her opinions.

#### *Opinions of women regarding a few gender issues*

Some statements regarding the couple and the family behaviors were probed in 7 statements at Table 21, and a few gender issues were thus examined.

Table 21 – Women’s opinions regarding couple and the family behaviors

	Totally agree	Agree a lot	Agree a little	Do not agree	Do not know	TOTAL
1. It is good that women have children before being 25 years old	13	05	09	16	03	46
2. The important decisions should be taken jointly by husband and wife	35	11	--	--	--	46
3. It is useful that the couple resort to contraceptives	36	03	06	01	--	46
4. To have children, there must be adequate economical means	35	05	04	02	--	46
5. In a family, the men work and the women stay at home taking care of the children	04	01	13	28	--	46
6. Children must have the same religion of their parents	07	02	07	30	--	46
7. Children must adopt the habits of the country they live	20	09	13	04	--	46

The first statement which states: “It is good for women to have children before being 25 years old”, encountered more agreement than disagreement. In fact, only 16 women did not agree with it and 3 were undecided. This may suggest that the role of motherhood is more valued among the respondents at the expense of other educational and professional projects.

Considering statement number 2, the fact that all respondents either totally agree or agreed a lot that the important decisions should be taken jointly by



husband and wife may suggest the belief in the power balance among couples. In regard to statement 3, which affirms that the use of contraceptives could be a useful resort to the couple, almost all women agreed with it with the exception of a woman who is not a nun, but made her votes and is celibate. Curiously, the other women who were nuns (3) agreed that couples could resort to them.

In regard to statement 4, which relates to the need of adequate economical means to have children, the majority of women agreed with it. This may suggest a modern economical notion of family planning. Statement 5, which relates to the division of labor of men and women, suggested explicitly a traditional role in which in a family, the men work and the women stays at home taking care of the children. This was the affirmation that caused more reaction among women since some discussed their ideas. More than half women (28) did not agree with it, but still 18 women believed it was a good option. In some cases, they explicated that when children are young it was better that women stayed home. Analyzing the five initial statements together, they seem to indicate that women on the whole, valued balanced decision making between husband and wife and believed in family planning. However, affirmations 1 and 5 that produced more mixed results were those in which the motherhood role was at stake.

In relation to statement 6, which states that children should have the same religion of their parents more than half women disagreed with it. This reveals a freedom in religious values. Finally, in regard to statement 7, most women believed in different degrees that children must adopt the habits of the country they live in. This may indicate the awareness that assimilation process is necessary when children are in a different country. In sum, responses to statements 6 and 7

provided by women seem to indicate in general, flexible values for upbringing children.

### *Women's perceptions of prostitution*

When asked about the activities of most Brazilian women in Rome, the president of ADBI explained that they commonly work in: domestic services, tourism related to prostitution and religious organizations. Furthermore, the other key woman to the Brazilian community, who has an active role in finding jobs and housing, estimated that about 40% to 50% of Brazilian women in Rome could be working with this activity. It is unclear the extent to which this activity is, in fact, highly performed. Since prostitution is highly stigmatized, one wonders if this estimation reflects the reality. Whatever is the truth, prostitution somehow permeates the lives of a few respondents and influences them.

Due to the taboo involved in prostitution and the widespread notion of this activity among Brazilian women in Italy, it is not surprising that this activity did not appear as a self-ascribed activity. Nonetheless, it is quite interesting the ways in which the issue of prostitution appeared during interviews, revealing different forms to deal with prostitution according to one's own perspective. In 2 interviews, it was displayed as an activity done by others that they knew closely and that they had the option to exert. For instance, a 33 years old woman from the Brazilian Southeast said: "Not yet. I do not dance, I do not go into prostitution like the ones I know. I have the same work values that I did before coming". Another 26 years old, coming from the Brazilian South, explained: "I have met many prostitutes when I arrived. The friend that I had in Brazil who invited me to come to Rome took my

money and wanted only to work at the night. She could not understand my option. I instead preferred to work in a family house and belong to the church”.

During 2 other interviews, prostitution of Brazilian women was perceived as hampering their relationships with Italian men. A 45 years old, coming from the Southeast said: “I do not feel well integrated here because Italians think Brazilian women are just for sex. I believe the widespread behavior of the majority of Brazilian women who come to prostitution in Italy is responsible for this negative perception”. Still, a 25 years old woman born at the Brazilian Northeast complained: “I was abused by an Italian. While I thought to be seriously dating him, he wanted just sex from me. Then, I discovered that his behavior was due to the image Italians have of Brazilian women being prostitutes”.

Moreover, prostitution was even seen as an activity where the participants needed help. A 33 years old nun, originally from the Brazilian South, said she would like to work with some of the Brazilian prostitutes she knew in Rome in a more systematic way. A 50 years old woman, originally from the Brazilian Northeast and who had done a lot of volunteer work for ADBI said: “Cultural interpreters are very important for the Brazilian prostitutes at the Italian prisons”.

Last but not least, prostitution was seen as something to be criticized during an interview. A 30 years old woman for example, coming from the Southeast, contended: “I believe all Brazilian women should look into household assistance in Italy. Prostitution is an easy life, not good”.

Finally, a 38 years old mother, coming from the Brazilian Midwest and whose 19 years old daughter was recently deported, explained that this happened because her daughter was very pretty and that for sure the Italian policemen

thought she would work as a prostitute. It is important to note that her friends listening to what had happened did not share this mother's rationale.

### *Problems experienced by women during their stay in Rome*

According to the president of ADBI, most problems that Brazilian immigrant women faced in Rome were related to: moral and physical abuse by partners; conflicts of young women being married to old Italian partners; the interference of mothers in law; women who managed to separate but were unable to move back due to the fear of losing the care of their children since their ex husbands did not sign permission for their children to move to Brazil; a few Italians threatening their ex-wives that they would tell the authorities that they worked as prostitutes; the fact that the only legal work stay granted by authorities in Italy was for domestic service; and the misfit of job aspiration when women hold a university diploma and instead, worked with household assistance.

The third key person to the Brazilian community explained that she tries to help Brazilians finding jobs and housing because these are the general problems faced by the majority. She believes that if they are willing to work hard and honestly they will, in the long run, settle and adjust.

During the interviews conducted, working problems appeared twice. A 25 year old woman, born at the Brazilian South, had problems working as a domestic servant for an Italian family because she was humiliated without reason and complained to the authorities to receive her last payment. Another 28 years old, born at the Brazilian Northeast and working for a Brazilian diplomatic family, complained to be receiving less than the average paid in Rome. She actually

received less than all other interviewed women doing the same job. The key woman who finds jobs illustrated cases in which some Brazilians employers, especially diplomats, try to avoid their servants' socialization in the host country and pay less than the Italians ones with the rationale that their earnings are, nonetheless, higher than the paid in Brazil and that it should be suffice for the domestic servants. Zarembka (2004) cites circumstances in the United States where diplomats abuse their domestic servants but not only in regard to payment.

### *Evaluating women's empowerment*

Women's empowerment in the migration process may be related to the initial step of the decision making and to who benefits with this process. The benefits can be measured considering their social integration in the host society, the ways their earnings have been spent and if women perceived any gains.

The Brazilian studied women took the primarily role for the migration process, due to the fact that the job demand has been more feminine and because even in family reunion cases, in this study, the marriage started after the migration process. It is obvious that single and childless Brazilian women were more prone to undertake this process than their married counterparts.

Grasso (1994) contends that there are some women who belong to ethnic groups who migrate alone or with their children and that these cannot be seen in the classical case of family reunion. Thus, this study may indicate that Brazilian women tend to immigrate in this fashion. They were indeed protagonist in the decision to migrate, like in the study conducted by Farina and Terzera (2003). Therefore, it is difficult to make the distinction described by Birindelli and Farina

(2003) of women being either a first or secondary actor in the migration process. A few women, in Rome for family reunion, could not be defined as secondary actors, because they have been in Italy previously as legal workers or as students. For whatever purpose, the decision to migrate did not seem to have been taken due to family pressure.

Among the studied women, the decision took several forms or a combination of them. The decisions were taken either alone or influenced by others such as family members, employers, friends or partners. The influence of others may prove to result in bad or good situation. In four cases, family members (three female cousins and a sister) exploited these women to such an extent that they felt as slaves and moved out. In other instances, 3 groups of sisters and 1 godmother with her goddaughter helped each other and were often socially together sharing their migration experience and providing support to one another.

Even though the decision to migrate appeared lacking family pressure, they might be compelled to send money and to provide material goods for their children or ill family members abroad. As table 22 demonstrates, it is clear that women have been providing the welfare of others. They had provided not only to members of their nuclear family but also to the extensive family. Still, there were many women who have been spending for their own benefit (21). It was also found those who provided both for their family members and for themselves (7). The fact that women provided for the welfare of others, feeling responsible for them, can be argued as a sign of autonomy if they freely decide how money should be spent and have pride to have this power. For instance, a 46 years old woman, born at the Brazilian Southeast, working as a domestic servant and living in Rome for 18 years

contended: “I am happy to have to spend money on my self and on my family in Brazil. I bought a house in Rome and always helped my sister who is ill and my nephews”.

However, when women have difficulty of spending on them, it can be also a sign of lack of autonomy. In this study in two instances, there were complains of such difficulty. One is a 37 years old woman, born at the Brazilian Southeast who explained: “I did not pursue university degree in my country because I became unemployed and I could not pay the tuition fees and at the same time help my family. Yet, I should have been more selfish since my dream was to study. I cannot help being differently. Now, my father is ill and I end up sending much of my money to help him because he does not have help from the Brazilian government”.

Table 22 – Different forms of spending earnings by women

Send money or goods to nuclear family in Brazil	04
Send money or goods to extensive family in Brazil	11
Send money to others (friends and church)	03
Send money and goods for own benefit	08
Send money and goods for own benefit and also benefit of extensive family in Brazil	07
Do not send money or goods	13
TOTAL	46

Another way to evaluate women’s empowerment was through what they told they were gaining from their lives in Italy. A few women explicated that, despite working as domestic servants, they were nevertheless able to travel around, study the Italian culture and make friends. One was able to pursue her university diploma in Rome and another was under way. Another few also explained that they valued immensely the volunteer activities they were involved in. It is important to highlight

the fact that their empowerment can be seen in their lives, previous to living in Rome. Therefore, for some women their experiences in Rome appeared as an extension of the empowerment process, which started earlier. In other cases, women found empowerment in their new lives in Rome.

Table 23 highlights women's perceptions if migration changed their lives. Many women (33) had explained how they matured and changed psychologically from the migration experience. For example, a 30 years old woman born at the Brazilian South, explained: "I learned to see here the world with other eyes. I changed my way of thinking and being. It has helped me to grow as a person and see people and reality with different eyes. I think I became more human and started to question if my votes to the church are the right option." Additionally, a 44 year old woman from Brazilian Midwest said crying: "I have changed so much. I was raised with too much ignorance. And I came in Italy to regret so much what I did to my daughters punishing them, obligating them to follow a religion and to get married virgins. It was a great openness to come here and see other things. I have opened my mind and I see a completely different world".

A few women explicated because they did not experience changes. Other women stressed with pride that they preserved their cultural values as Brazilians. For example, a 59 years old woman, born at the Brazilian Northeast said: "I experienced no change. We have to be our culture". Other women contended that they had not changed at all as persons. Still, a 30 years old woman, also originally from the Brazilian Northeast, explicated: "Migration did not change and will never change my life and the way I am". This emphasis in the aforementioned statements seemed, somehow, a fear of changing and preserving the culture grounding



provided by the country of origin.

Table 23 – Self perceived changes in women's lives considering migration process

Experienced changes	33
Did not experience changes	13
Total	46

Not always were the life changes perceived as positive. A 25 years old woman, originally from the Brazilian Northeast, who came to work for a cousin as a domestic servant and baby sit her child, ended up feeling exploited by her and having an affair with the now ex-husband of this cousin, who not only took her side but felt in love for her. She said: “I would never think of myself a year ago just graduating, taking my university degree and coming to Italy to work as a domestic servant and then be living such a confusing love experience. I started feeling afraid of life”. Another 32 years old woman, originally from the Brazilian Southeast, who moved after meeting her Italian husband in Brazil said: “A new person was born in Italy. I think the change is for worse because I was more affectionate. Here, I am more closed”.

Almost half of them, 22 women evaluated they have had gains generated at their lives in Italy. It cannot be enough emphasized that the universe of those who experienced life changes was not always coincident with the one accounting for gains from their lives in Italy. For instance, a 55 years old woman, originally from the Brazilian Southeast, working as a domestic servant said. “Before, I came I already did volunteer work and worked as both a domestic servant and a nurse. Here, I lived one of the best days of my life when I went to represent the country at the international volunteer day, due to my work for Betinho’s food campaign, but I think my life would be good anywhere”. This woman explained that she came to

Italy because she had lost her main paid job in Brazil and a friend referred her to come to work with Brazilian diplomats. She sees as gains from her life in Italy: both her paid and volunteer work, the opportunity to travel to many countries, the rebuilding of her family's house in Brazil and the friends she has made from all social classes. Besides, a 49 years old woman from the Brazilian Midwest explained: "I grew as a person because I learned so many cultures and then, I compared good and bad things of Brazil with other countries. It is an opportunity to know people, to know how they think differently. I grew immensely and so did my children". Moreover, another 41 years old woman, originally from the Brazilian South and very enthusiastic of the possibilities of life in Rome and Italy in general, believed all immigrants should ask themselves what could they do for Italy.

Grasso's (1994) distinguished between two forms that the female migration experience may unfold. In the first one, the migration experience is instrumental and limited in time. In the second one it is promotional. This is the one in which women try to adjust to the new society that they chose, due to its more equalitarian gender values and when they can become emancipated. Bearing in mind this distinction, it seems that to many studied women their experiences were instrumental, and little or no empowerment was actually gained from the process. However, there were 22 women who reported that they have been promoted to a new world. A few of them are indeed inspiring models. To name a few: the president of ADBI, the key woman who finds job and housing for the Brazilian community, the aforementioned woman whose volunteer work in Italy gained such recognition that she went to represent Brazil. For instance, according to the third key person to the Brazilian community, the materials gains immigrants may have

led them to buy important things such as land, houses and apartments back in Brazil. Moreover, she argued that there were other cultural gains immigrants may have such as learning a new language and culture. She perceived this asset as empowering all, particularly children who went to schools in Italy.

## CONCLUSION

The social integration of the Brazilian studied women proved to be not easy and for many women the strength to carry on appeared to lie exactly on their symbolic need to be continuously in relation with the country of origin. Thus, frequent international telephone contacts, friendship with more Brazilians than other nationals, sending money and building houses can be interpreted as signs of their need to belong to and invest in Brazil, maintaining an umbilical cord with the country of origin. For other women, almost half of them, despite the difficulties and due to the benefits of integrating at the host society, the migration experience empowered them. Their empowerment was revealed in their autonomy to spend their earnings, in what they told were their psychological, cultural and material gains, and in how they wanted to and did transform themselves or the social world they lived in. In general, women valued balanced decision making between husband and wife and believed in family planning. Concerning motherhood, while some tended to resort to traditional values of the division of labor within the family, others were more open-minded.

The studied women were all protagonist in choosing migration. Thus, the objective opportunities women had of marriage, friendship, employment and

volunteer work in Rome did not necessarily lead all to have a more autonomous life, but did provide them at least an instrumental choice. Their marriage may have yielded the status of a 1<sup>st</sup> world nationality, the employment may led to more earning power, the volunteer work may have provided them personal satisfaction and knowledge, and finally the odds derived from friendship could be countless.

While all had a protagonist role in departing from Brazil, how they used the benefit of their improved earning power was varied. While some women felt responsible to use their money for the welfare of their family members, many other were also concerned how to use it for their own welfare and how to benefit from their stay in Italy. Even though half of them wanted to return to Brazil, this did not always mean they were not socially integrated and empowered in Italy. In reality, most were socially integrated and less than half were, in different ways, empowered through the migration experience.

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