



## Interview

Heloísa Maria Galvão\*

For this number the REMHU presents an interview to Heloísa Maria Galvão, Brazilian citizen living in the US, cofounder of the Brazilian Women's Group – a non-profit organization which acts to strengthen the work of the communitarian leaderships, to promote the history, the culture and the mother language of Brazil, as well as to facilitate the adjustment to the English speaking community and to the US culture.

1. Dear Heloísa, what is the Brazilian Women's Group (BWG), when was it founded and what are its uses?

*The BWG is a volunteer-run organization of Brazilian immigrant women, whose mission is to promote political and cultural awareness and contribute to the development and self-sufficiency of the Brazilian community, especially women and their children. The BWG was started in 1995 by a group of Brazilian immigrant women of various backgrounds and occupations. They came together to become community leaders who would "make a difference" in the Brazilian community, encouraging the Brazilian community, particularly women, to stand up for their rights in the United States.*

*The Mission of the Group is to promote the organization's goals through community organizing, empowering the community members to speak for themselves regardless of immigration status. The BWG has a specific focus on women, and since its beginning, it has sought to develop women leaders for the Brazilian community.*

*Our overall goal is to empower Brazilian women and strengthen the Brazilian Community. We believe that social change will not occur*

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\* Brazilian citizen graduated (master's degree) in Boston University, living in the US since 1988 where she cofounded the bi-language newspaper "The Brazilian Monthly" and the "Brazilian Women Group". She is the author of publications such as "The XXth century travelers": an oral history of Brazilian immigrant women in Boston." (Rio de Janeiro, 2005). Boston / EUA.

*without political struggle, participation and awareness. We believe that immigrants advocating for themselves, over time, will help meet this long term vision of social change. This is one reason why the BWG has made the decision not to become a social services provider agency. We want the Brazilian community to organize and be able to speak for itself and we see ourselves as a tool that helps to facilitate this process.*

*The BWG believes that women's positions and lives can only be improved through a focus on educating and empowering the entire community, as women do not live their lives in a vacuum, but in social networks and relationships. Ultimately, women's lives are improved when the whole community is educated and strengthened. In return, empowered women strengthen families and the community as most immigrant women remain primary caretakers as well as important financial contributors to the household.*

*The BWG is the only group within the Brazilian community to provide women with a supportive environment to develop their leadership skills, express opinions, and most importantly, to give a voice to so many Brazilian women who might not have had one otherwise. The Group promotes discussion groups, seminars and meetings around topics such as education, immigrants' rights and women's issues, coordinates events that promote Brazilian-American culture and female leadership, and provides educational services such as English as a Second Language classes.*

*The BWG has also established a cooperative for Brazilian women who work as housecleaners and have worked closely with University of Mass-Lowell and Tufts University to improve the health of Brazilians.*

## 2. Tell us what motivated you to create the Brazilian Women's Group.

*During home visits I used to do for Even Start, a program based in Somerville, Massachusetts, I met other Brazilian women. Mostly they were young Brazilian women, with young children and recent arrivals in the U.S. During these visits, we shared our feelings as immigrants in the United States, such as loneliness, fear, low self-esteem, a sense of disconnectedness and eventually depression. At the same time, we shared a strong will to "make it" in America. We wanted our children to have better educational options and our families to have better opportunities in life than they would have had in Brazil. We did not want to be mere observers of this process; we wanted to play a role in it. We were aware of the struggle that we faced, but we were ready to take up the challenge. Those visits and those women were the seed of the Brazilian Women's Group.*

3. What are the main problems Brazilian women face in Boston? Are the current problems similar to those in the 90ies?

*Isolation and loneliness are two of the greatest challenges Brazilian women face when they immigrate. Back in Brazil they had the support of their family, friends, and neighbors. Moreover, they did not have to prove themselves all the time. Here, they have to work, learn English and how to navigate the host culture, in addition to taking care of their children and reaffirming themselves as women and mothers on a daily basis. Problems have not changed over the years. I believe that what has changed is the gravity seriousness of some problems. For instance, immigration status wasn't a big deal in the early 1990's. On the contrary, now many families are living in fear and underground, many others have been separated by deportation and detention. In short, it has become much more difficult and challenging to be an immigrant. This situation is aggravated if you are a woman, come from a developing country, do not speak, write or understand the language or how the system works.*

4. Does the migration of women in Boston bring any identity change regarding the gender relations? Does migration generate emancipation or does it create new kinds of submission?

*As I said earlier, in Brazil women do not have to prove or explain themselves as often as they do as immigrant women. Here they have to prove they are good mothers and they care for their children and families. Many times school systems and health care providers, among others, assume Brazilian parents are not caring. This happens usually because parents do not attend school site meetings or call teachers or because sometimes they medicate their children with home medicine. In the U.S., children under 12 cannot be left home alone, they cannot physically reprimand their children. Many parents are unaware of these rules.*

*Due to stereotypes well established in the culture, in the U.S. as well as in many other places around the world, Brazilian women have to demystify the assumption that they are easy and wear dental floss bikinis, for instance. These stereotypes add to the pressure because in Brazil the women know how to react or what to expect, but here it becomes a burden to prove that being a Brazilian woman does not mean that you act like this or like that.*

*The other big change happens at home. Brazilian women come to the U.S. and fast become an important household earner, many times making as much or more than their husbands. They tend to learn English faster and to get involved in community affairs. Some husbands*

*have difficulties accepting this new partner and this new woman and they start pressuring them to not go to English classes or community meetings at night. As a Brazilian woman I interviewed for my book, “the Travelers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” put it, there is a tendency among Brazilian immigrant couples to strengthen or to dismantle their marriages because some men get uneasy with the “new” wife they have at home.*

*I believe Brazilian women tend to emerge stronger from these relationships. They understand their rights more, they are aware of their contribution at home and they tend to press or pressure their husbands for more help with home chores. In conclusion, I think that immigration tends to lead to emancipation rather than to submission.*

5. The “second generation” – children of Brazilian citizens who were born in the US – is an up to date theme. In your opinion, in what way do these children conciliate the parents’ culture and the culture of the country they live in? Can we say that the second generations face identity problems?

*For sure the second generation, or the “1 ½ generation” suffers from an identity crisis. This happens because they tend to identify more with the American culture and language than with the Brazilian culture and language, if they came at an early age or were born here. This identity crisis is even stronger if the children cannot go to Brazil and spend a few years there, or have been decades in the U.S. and have no connections to Brazil or to their family in Brazil, or if their parents do not speak or read English and/or do not understand the American way of living. Even when parents do speak English and do go to Brazil, children tend to identify with the American culture because the American culture becomes the mainstream culture and English becomes the children’s first language.*

*When children come at an older age, there is more of a chance that they are bilingual and bicultural. It all depends also on what they hear at home and on what image of Brazil their parents pass on to them.*

6. Another challenging point is the relation between the Brazilian community and the Hispanic communities. In your opinion is there a Latin-American identity that allows closeness between the different groups? Do Brazilians identify themselves as Latinos or do they point out their own cultural customs?

*I would say that many Brazilians do not identify themselves as Hispanic because this term has a bad connotation in the U.S. (less educated, hold menial jobs, not polite). Brazilians like to be recognized and identified as Brazilians, meaning Brazilians speak Portuguese and the Brazilian*

*culture differs from Hispanic culture. Some Brazilians will identify as Latinos but it all depends on how educated Brazilians are. Some Brazilians do not want to be identified as Latinos or Hispanics because in the U.S. this implies that one speaks Spanish and Brazilians, as I said, want to be identified by who they are, of Portuguese descendency and not of Hispanic descendency.*

7. Is there any other important point to mention?

*I would like to highlight that the Brazilian community of Boston is the most politically organized group of the United States. We have come a long way and we still have a long way to go, but it is important to acknowledge that Brazilians of Boston are occupying political space by becoming American citizens and registering to vote and by taking up professional jobs and speaking up as Brazilians.*

### **Entrevista**

*A REMHU traz neste número a entrevista a Heloísa Maria Galvão, brasileira residente nos EUA, co-fundadora do “Grupo Mulher Brasileira” (Brazilian Women’s Group), organização sem fins lucrativos que atua em vistas a fortalecer o trabalho de lideranças comunitárias, promover a história, a cultura e a língua do Brasil, bem como facilitar o entrosamento com a comunidade de língua inglesa e a cultura dos Estados Unidos.*