

Julia Taylor Kennedy

MA candidate, International Relations 2010

“Navigating Migration: Economic, social and religious influences in women's migration between Brazil and Connecticut”

Governador Valadares, Brazil

Women, Religion, and Globalization Summer Grant: Final Project Report

I arrived in Governador Valadares, Brazil on August 2 at 4 a.m. with three telephone numbers, a microphone and a book about Brazilian migration entitled *Becoming Brazuca*. This toolkit, along with background interviews and research conducted in Connecticut, proved invaluable to my research of women's migration from the small Brazilian city to the United States.

Over the course of four weeks in Governador Valadares, I recorded conversations with 40 women, academics and community leaders about the migration experience and its effect on women's empowerment. The telephone numbers belonged to relatives of migrants I had met in the large Brazilian community of Danbury, CT, and unlocked networks of families who used migration networks for economic mobility.

As emphasized in the nickname “ValaDOLARES,” Governador Valadares possesses a culture of migration. Many migrants have recently returned from the United States to their home city due to economic difficulties, deportation or fear of it, or to retire after many years working abroad. Due to the current U.S. recession, more residents of the city are looking to Australia and Europe as potential migration destinations.

The women I interviewed identified emotional unhappiness, family members in the United States, and economic struggles as the primary motivating factors for migration. A few also mentioned an urge for adventure as a motivating factor.

The migration experience puts an enormous strain on family relationships. While communication is affordable and convenient, married couples with one spouse in the United States and the other in Brazil often experience grave difficulties. Couples who migrate together also experience strain upon arrival in the United States and upon their return to Brazil.

Women's roles within the family shift, causing ripples in household income, chores and childcare. In the United States, women are expected to work as hard as men, and often are able to earn equivalent or higher wages. This experience can bring a sense of empowerment to women, but that empowerment can also be complicated by elements of class.

Sueli Siquieras, a sociologist at the Governador Valadares campus of UNIVALE and contributor to *Becoming Brazuca*, found in her interviews of migrants that women experience a higher level of independence in the United States as a result of their earning power. Upon return to Brazil, she found that men expect women to return to their original roles within the family as primary caretaker and secondary earner. This change in expectation, Siquieras found, can cause major friction.

While Siquieras' conclusions certainly applied to some cases in my own research pool, I discovered great variation in the relationship shifts between men and women. A counterexample came with Silvia (names have been changed to protect identity). A school principal in Governador Valadares, Silvia emigrated with her husband because his farm ran into financial difficulty. Silvia continued to work full-time in the U.S., but keenly felt a loss of power in her marriage because she worked a far lower-status job than she had in Brazil and was afraid to drive without a U.S. license.

While the familial power dynamic shifts depended on highly variable situations, I was able to draw certain conclusions. Control of household expenditures and decisions depend greatly upon the earning power of heads of households. Furthermore, Brazilian women perceive their power within the home as proportional to their earning power outside of it, which is thrown into sharper relief during the migration experience.

Religion also stood out as a major element in migration experiences. Most migrants identified faith and core values as a key to survival in the United States. Many also pointed to Brazilian religious networks as a supportive framework in their quest to find jobs, friends and a place of safety. Arlena, a member of the Brazilian Catholic Community in Danbury, said the church was the only place where she could relax and laugh with friends.

The Women, Religion and Globalization Fund at Yale's grant gave me the opportunity to do fieldwork necessary to better comprehend the migrant experience. I will be pulling my observations together this fall through a directed reading on migration and women's empowerment with Professor Patricia Pessar, culminating in a 25 to 30-page paper. My findings about women's empowerment in the field demonstrate value of fieldwork, and the nuanced understandings it can bring. I look forward to working further with the recorded interviews to see what additional insights they hold.