

## Country report: Older People in Brazil

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Brazil is the country with the largest number of older people in Latin America and the fifth in the world. Although its present 9% of senior citizens seems incomparably smaller than the around 20% in many European countries, the manner in which society accommodates the participation of the different age groups within the heterogeneous population is more serious. While in the Old World there was a slow demographic transition, with time enough for the gradual development of public policies that treated with equanimity the citizens of various ages, and more specifically, the older people, Brazil has had to skip a few stages in the process, with difficulty - and its public policies are still incipient.

Because Brazil is a country of continental proportions with great regional diversities, with a class society, and a demographically bigger contingent of women than men, it is no wonder that its population of older people(almost 15 millions) is heterogeneous. The majority of them live in the Southeastern and in the Southern states, which are among the most developed in the country, mainly in Rio de Janeiro, 12.3%, and also in the Northeastern State of Paraíba, with 11% in Campina Grande.

Apart from the census data, research has also revealed this heterogeneity. Social practices which have been studied in depth show that there is a diversity of ways in which to grow old that do not correspond to the traditional expectations that used to associate old age to poverty or disenfranchisement, with consequential attitudes related to the isolation of the older people, be it in the work environment, or in the forms of sociability themselves and their definitive relocation to domestic life. Thus, the experience of ageing in Brazilian society offers us a clear view presenting unsuspected possibilities in the horizon of being old in post modernity.

It is evident that the condition of poverty persists, since the amount of money paid to old age retired and pensioners is very small – part of this group of older people earns even less than the minimum wage in the country (US\$100), but the fact that they can count nowadays with some kind of benefit (mainly retirement benefits and pensions) guarantees their survival and that of their own family, i.e., of other generations.

At the same time, the development of the medical sciences and the broader scope of State involvement in the implementation of public hygiene measures and disease prevention, has made it possible for old people to live longer, in good health

and, thus, allowing them to work until they are older, or even, to go back to work, which helps, even in a small proportion, increase their earnings and the level of help they can actually give their families. These two intertwined facts constitute two of the basic characteristics of the older people's present situation in Brazil.

Due to the high levels of unemployment, or to the precariousness of employment these days, young generations have difficulty in finding jobs – specially those from the poorer ranks of society, but not only them - and they carry on living in their parents and grandparents' house for long periods, even after they themselves have got married. Thus, there is an increase in the number of multigenerational families where, grandparents, children and grandchildren (and not rarely great-grandchildren) share the same roof, owned by the older generation, and the income of parents and grandparents ensures the possibility of reproduction of various generations.

On the other hand, the return of the “young” older person (in their 60's to 65's) back to the work force is following a surprising and marked pattern of involvement in Brazil. This is not only advantageous for the companies that employ them, since they have to pay out fewer benefits, as it is to the aged persons, that have their earnings increased. At the same time, working out of home allow the old aged persons the opportunity to extend their sociability and forms of self-expression.

A third marked feature in the life of a Brazilian older person nowadays is precisely this intensification and variety of forms with which they can exercise their sociability. The traditional older person is always thought of individually, solitarily, as someone's grandfather or grandmother; a gathering of senior people or even the concept of them as a group is a sign of our times. They make possible a new image of old age and are a consequence of the social conditions that produce, not only a growing longevity, but also of cultural, educational and social services put at their disposal. And they love it.

However, regarding the income and the possibility of helping their families, and the chance of being part of the work force and of being sociable, the older people differ internally not only with reference to their class situation, but also due to gender conditions. Women, who tend to live longer than men, consist of 60% of the older people in Brazil; because traditionally they have less access to education, they have received less formal education than men (this is changing among the younger generations) and, consequently, they have had less access to employment and to the possibility of receiving benefits (which has also been changing). They also are the ones who receive Social Security pensions as widows and who contribute additionally towards the income and the sustainability of the family with the carrying out of domestic chores in their own houses. The fact that the old age pensioners' movement is made up mainly of men who used to be union leaders in a recent past, is also a gender issue. The movement in Brazil is widely responsible for this new, more dynamic image of the older people. Finally, it is mostly the women who take part and who are more enthusiastic in the many social older people's groups, the

universities for senior people and the specific activities for the retired, as a means of making new friends, having fun and taking part in public life.

Thus, with so many social innovations with dynamic resonance among the older people, one must highlight the fact that the traditional expectations society had of this group has also suffered changes. This can be seen by their effective participation in family, professional and community life, by their affirmative actions, which are explicit in the Retired and Pensioners' Movement in the struggle against the Federal Government to increase their earnings, and by the integration of considerable amounts of older men and women in convivial groups where they can build different forms of sociability in public spaces.

The media has contributed towards the greater visibility of older people through articles that look at the different aspects and ways of life of senior citizens, producing and influencing new social representations about them.

*Source: Hoff, A. (2005) Spring Newsletter 2005 of the Research Committee (RC11) on the Sociology of Aging of the International Sociological Association (ISA). Oxford: Oxford Institute of Ageing, pp. 13-15.*