Women Workers, Working Girls and the Women’s Movement:
Gender, Opportunity and Morality in Twentieth Century Brazil

The majority of the historiography of Brazil makes only mere mention of half of the population, if addressing issues of concern to women at all. Perhaps due to the resurgence of feminist intellectualism in the 1990s, works on the history of women and gender in Brazil have proliferated. June E. Hahner, Sandra McGee Deutsch, and Susan Besse all contribute to the modern understanding of Brazilian feminism, and the ways that both men and women shaped gender and society.¹ Their scholarship on the women’s movement, concentrated in Rio de Janeiro in the early twentieth century, focuses on the role played by women in modernizing gender roles within the larger context of an industrializing authoritarian state. The work of Barbara Weinstein and Theresa R. Veccia illuminate the ways in which gender roles were influenced and upheld by elite ideals and industrial practice.² Their analyses of the female labor force in São Paulo reveal that vocational education, low wages, gendered labor division, and the idealization of motherhood all functioned to limit opportunity for women. Sueann Caulfield and Cristiana Schettini Pereira examine the effects that these new standards of citizenship had on women of the lowest social and legal status – prostitutes.³ These writers demonstrate that police intervention imposed bourgeois notions of morality on women who lived outside the boundaries set for them by the elite men of Rio.

Collectively, this body of feminist scholarship sheds light on the experiences of Brazilian women within the changing social, economic, and political landscapes of the early twentieth century. Through the application of new ideology, modern industry, and judiciary control, Brazil’s male-dominated society found new ways to shape gender identity and the ideals of acceptable female behavior. Though some women resisted these new standards, the
state and elite society were able to prevent any disruption to their larger projects of “civilizing” and “moralizing” the nation by exploiting women’s political participation, their labor, and perhaps most importantly, their bodies.

Before discussing women’s participation in the industrial work force or commercial sex trade, it is necessary to provide some context for the larger social struggles of the era. An overview of the women’s movement of the 1920s and 1930s reveals the tensions between women’s realities and the ideology of Brazil’s elite male culture. Scholars of the women’s movement in Brazil lend a fresh perspective to the roles of women as wives, mothers, workers and citizens. Their work confronts the ways in which changes in these roles either challenged or supported the advancement of a male-dominated society.

June E. Hahner was one of the first female academics to write on the women’s movement. In her 1990 book *Emancipating the Female Sex*, Hahner addresses the opportunities and obstacles to women’s legal equality and social advancement throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She explains that the first women’s movement of Brazil owed its inception not only to women involved with the abolition movement, who advocated education for women as a means to secure greater autonomy and social progress, but also to early graduates of The Normal Schools throughout Brazil. By the turn of the century, teachers had helped to raise literacy rates among women and also produced a body of literature questioning “women’s roles and rights” within modern society.

One such woman, Bertha Lutz, held a degree from the Faculty of Law in Rio de Janeiro and led the organization which would be responsible for women’s suffrage. In the early 1920s, she founded the Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino (FBPF), a national feminist organization dedicated to greater public and political participation for women. The FBPF was supported primarily by professional women who worked with members of the national congress throughout the 1920s, and succeeded in sparking debate on women’s suffrage. Susan Besse explores the subtle ways in which these women and their male political supporters interacted with industry and culture to modernize gender roles and promote elite conceptions of acceptable behavior. She argues that these relationships contributed to an ideology which sought to preserve a strong gendered social hierarchy, and
strict social control. Besse explains that the FBPF actively upheld conservative values in its support for the advancement of education for women, claiming that it could transform them into “more competent housewives.” As Besse makes clear in her 1996 Restructuring Patriarchy, the organization did little to change women’s status or social roles. These were strongly upheld among the working classes through the efforts of extreme conservative women’s groups, working through the Church, the state, and the press.

Sandra McGee Deutsch provides insight into the state’s use of conservative female activism to preserve gender roles, and social order, throughout the 1930s. Her work focuses on how women’s groups of the extreme right promoted the image of the mother throughout the early twentieth century. Nineteenth century “Social Catholicism,” the precursor to these rightist women’s organizations, envisioned woman as the “guardians of purity in society at large.” Susan Besse argued that later proponents of “Catholic feminism” saw education as a means for women to contribute to social progress, and fulfill domestic duties; they supported the vote for women as a way to “redeem the corrupt political system” through the application of “natural” feminine virtues. In the 1930s, this Catholic activism was adopted by Brazilian fascists who later formed the Ação Integralista Brasileira. The AIB was the “first nationally organized legal mass party” in Brazil, and the most popular political party at the time. The AIB supported sometimes violent female activism through a corps termed the “Green Blouses,” who, as Deutsch demonstrates, set the standard “for models of womanhood, demonstrating piety, self-sacrifice, patriotism, obedience, decorum, and domesticity.” Besse shows how these right-wing feminists criticized women who took jobs not because of their duty to the family, but for their own personal fulfillment. Further, Deutsch makes clear that these rightist women agreed with elite men that a “women’s proper place was in the home; their main task was to educate future leaders.” They advocated for improvement of “the economic standing of the poor” through state and social programs, so that wives would no longer need to enter the workforce.

There were other voices, though they represented the fringes of upper- and middle-class feminism. Susan Besse details the lives of two leftist feminists, Maria Lacerda de Moura and Patrícia Galvão, who wrote for São Paulo’s feminist press throughout the 1920s. Both
attacked the mainstream feminist movement as “bourgeois,” and accused FBPF of ignoring the rights and struggles of working women.21 One other such radical of the time, Ercília Nogueira Cobra, suggested that “poverty, the weight of social prejudices, discrimination, and prostitution” were not “as humiliating, suffocating, or oppressive as marriage.”22 Thus, upper- and middle-class women who aligned with leftist feminist ideology posed a clear threat to patriarchy, but had little effect. These feminists raised concerns, among elite men and women, about women’s rights, personal autonomy, sexual objectification, sexual abuse, and infidelity or promiscuity.23 They were attacked by journalists, novelists, cartoonists, critics, and conservative women for provoking “moral corruption, scandal, and family tragedies” through their rejection of woman’s traditional domestic role.24

The right wing women’s suffrage movement was obviously more acceptable to the state than radical feminism. As June Hahner argues, moderate and conservative female activists who demanded the vote championed elite values, legal reform, and civil or political rights, rather than social reform or the economic emancipation of women.25 This was especially true of the FBPF, which “remained Brazil’s preeminent suffragist and feminist organization” throughout the 1920s and 30s. Federation leaders consistently argued that work and political involvement constituted an extension of women’s domestic roles.26

Despite the ground gained by the feminist organizations and women activists of the early twentieth century, all ultimately failed to present any real challenge to state or industry. Because most feminist groups were limited to a small number of light skinned, upper- and middle-class women, they “were slow to confront racial issues affecting women.”27 The larger feminist organizations of 1920s and 1930s also chose not address women’s working conditions.28 Feminists would have of course been aware that the domestic labor of poor, Afro-Brazilian women afforded them the opportunity to pursue interests outside of the home.29 Because of this fact, feminists focused on issues relevant mainly to upper- and middle-class women, which presented considerable racial and class divisions.30 Although the establishment of the Vargas regime in 1930 provided openings for feminists and suffragists, resulting in the women’s vote in 1932, the formation of the Estado Novo effectively “ended electoral politics and women’s participation in them” from 1937 to 1945.31 As a result, the
feminist movement of the 1920s and 1930s essentially ended when the Estado Novo began.\textsuperscript{32}

While the body of work on women’s activism among the upper-classes in Brazil grew, another group of scholars began exploring the experiences of the lower class. Barbara Weinstein examines how São Paulo’s “employers, union leaders, educators, and social workers… directly contributed to the marginalization of the woman who worked… [and] the idealization of the woman who remained at home.”\textsuperscript{33} In 1997, Theresa R. Veccia conducted interviews with women who had worked in São Paulo during the early- and mid-twentieth century. Her work provides invaluable insight to working women’s perceptions of gender roles, work, citizenship, and the tensions between idealized womanhood and economic realities.\textsuperscript{34} Susan Besse argues that while modernization provided elite and upper-class women greater access to education and professional occupations, working women experienced industry exploitation and “social prejudices” at work and in the home.\textsuperscript{35} These authors examine the ways in which industrialization influenced women’s roles as citizens, wives, and mothers, particularly through industry’s application of elite or conservative ideology. The restriction of women’s social activity, an important expression of male family honor and patriarchal social stratification, took on new forms in a modern, industrial society.\textsuperscript{36}

Until the early 1900s, upper- and middle-class men viewed factory work as unacceptable for women. Similarly, throughout the 1930s, jurist Augusto Olympio Viveiros de Castro argued against the presence of women in the workforce, and their right to wage labor.\textsuperscript{37} He cited “common knowledge” that “nature had destined women for domestic tasks and that they were ‘born exclusively for the home’” and this construction of women’s role in a modernizing society was shared by his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{38} Any “rights” women gained as citizens and workers, then, were contingent upon women’s adherence to their “natural” roles as wives and mothers, and their performance of these domestic “duties.”\textsuperscript{39}

During the 1920s and 30s, working-class women were increasingly relegated to the home through legal and educational reforms, meant to direct female workers into acceptable occupations that encouraged “women’s subordination to men through economic
dependence.” Meanwhile, educated and professional men worked diligently to strengthen new notions of marriage and the family, and to “transform it into a pillar of the new bourgeois society,” central to the progress and prosperity of the nation. Negative images of female workers in the press and elite ideology marginalized women, creating barriers to education and training while allowing industry to exploit their low-paid labor. Industrialists used a variety of tactics to uphold social hierarchy or reproduce idealized gender norms. Central among them were education reform and employment practices. While government and industry agreed with feminists that “female education was essential for fostering Brazil’s ‘evolution’ and ‘progress,’” their vision for the future differed.

State and industry funded education offered curriculum for women which emphasized preparation for their “natural” domestic roles. Barbara Weinstein offers as an example the Escola Profissional Feminina (EPF) in São Paulo, a vocational training school for women. The state-funded EPF offered courses for the development of domestic rather than industrial skills. Domestic courses were unpopular among the all-female student body, but were supported by “government officials and nonvocational educators” who attempted several times, unsuccessfully, to implement home economics courses. However, in 1935, São Paulo passed education reform which codified gendered division of training and labor; women were now institutionally barred from industrial courses.

Similarly, when industry-operated vocation training schools opened under the Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial (SENAI) in the 1940s, the promise of opportunity in the workforce was tempered by the fact that the course offerings were gender specific; while male students took courses in mathematics and Portuguese, female students were enrolled in sewing and domestic arts programs. As married women were largely responsible for “managing the household finances,” they undoubtedly benefitted in some way from these home economics courses, and may have enjoyed some power in decision making for family resources. However, it was more likely that they found themselves dependent on their husband’s wages, and responsible for resolving monetary problems. Due to their limited education, women had few options for securing wages. They were granted access only to those “jobs that offered… meager economic rewards, little social status, and few
opportunities for advancement,” and the majority were totally unprepared for university admission or professional careers.⁴⁹

Unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts, the intellectuals of the early twentieth century easily recognized that “access to respectable paid employment” was necessary for lower and middle class women, to keep them from starving or “falling into prostitution.”⁵⁰ Perhaps the shift in ideology was due in part to industry reliance on women’s labor in the textile mills of São Paulo, which were “the motor of Brazilian industry until the 1940s.”⁵¹ By enforcing sexual division of labor in the workforce, with women relegated to “acceptable” occupations in line with their “natural” virtues, employers ensured that social morality was not compromised.⁵²

To make female employment more attractive to young women and their families, industrialists of the early twentieth century promoted the belief that daughters and single women were safer from sexual abuse in public factories than in private domestic service jobs.⁵³ The reality, however, was that “children suffered beatings, [and] women were subject to [the] sexual exploitation of foremen and supervisors” while working in São Paulo’s mills and factories.⁵⁴ Industrialist Jorge Street tried to dismiss these concerns by explaining that mill work prevented the socially demoralizing expression of female sexuality by keeping girls and women occupied and earning, rather than home, alone, vulnerable.⁵⁵ The government passed a variety of protectionist legislation throughout the 1930s, supported by male labor union leaders who feared workplace competition and valued their status as “breadwinners.”⁵⁶ These measures included requirements for industry to address child labor and maternity leave.⁵⁷ While these laws had little to no effect for women working as domestic servants or in the informal economy, they resulted in industry discrimination and effectively restricted working-class and poor women’s access to employment.⁵⁸

The daily realities of working class women provided a stark contrast to the elite ideals they aspired to. While industry benefitted from the labor of working and lower class women, the “low wages” paid to female workers were “rationalized as appropriate for women employed only temporarily,” an argument which ignored the reality of women as self-supporting or contributors to the household.⁵⁹ Theresa R. Veccia’s study of one cotton mill
in São Paulo reveals data on the female workforce which was typical to the industry on the whole, specifically that female employment was long-term and necessary. The demographics of this particular labor force show that “one third of all the women working in the mill in 1935 were over thirty,” and that “the vast majority of these women were married.”

The main support system for these working married women was the industry’s social services organization, Serviço Social da Indústria (SESI), which had few means to address concerns of women workers but a strong network to assist housewives. SESI’s home-economics courses actively promoted the idea that “housewives, though not wage earners, were largely responsible for the standard of living… in their homes.” It was also not uncommon for SESI social workers to visit housewives at home when male workers faced financial problems. According to SESI’s president, Antônio Devisate, this was done in order “to see why the workers’ wives were not able to make their husbands’ wages go as far as they should.” Through its various programs, SESI promoted middle-class ideals among women workers while setting unattainable goals for domestic success. These women, in turn, likely accepted “SESI’s claims that skilled housewives could resolve such social problems as low wages, infant mortality, and malnutrition.” Between the 1940s and 1950s, the number of women employed in wage labor dropped. As Barbara Weinstein points out, “few working class women were likely to choose a permanent place as a semiskilled worker over the role of skilled domestic manager.” Even among women who remained in the workforce long-term, many “persisted in defining themselves through the prism of their familial roles” while giving legitimacy to “the (ideal) masculine breadwinning role,” despite the fact that these narratives rarely matched their own realities.

This gendered division of labor and Brazil’s continued racial disparity meant that black women, who had generally lower education and literacy rates, held the “worst positions” and earned the “lowest wages” in the new republic. In São Paulo’s industrial economy and Rio de Janeiro’s markets, “poor urban women had relatively few and unattractive choices” for work. As domestic servants and female mill workers, poor Afro-Brazilian women occupied the lowest social status among the female labor force, above only prostitutes. The conditions of their industrial and informal employment, including sexual
harassment, assault, lost wages or prolonged unemployment, was enough to persuade some women to become prostitutes.\textsuperscript{71} Prostitution in early twentieth century Rio de Janeiro provides an example of how some lower class women were able to challenge a system which confined them to narrow roles and often unattainable ideals.

The feminist scholars who address prostitution in Brazil expand on the notions set forth by June Hahner and Susan Besse, that elite society saw the socio-economic changes of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as having undermined “traditional gender roles and sexual morality.”\textsuperscript{72} Cristiana Schettini Pereira has analyzed court cases on pandering during the early twentieth century in Rio de Janeiro “to reveal how… police officers, jurists, the accused, and witnesses… made use of the law” to meet their own specific needs.\textsuperscript{73} Sueann Caulfield’s work examines prostitution in Rio during the same period, and demonstrates how issues of race and class were used to regulate women’s activities and uphold bourgeois ideals.\textsuperscript{74} Their work demonstrates that prostitution, because it served as a visible expression of modern corruption in Brazil’s capital city, posed a significant challenge to the patriarchal state.

As Pereira explains, elites “relied on biological theories of racial difference to justify social hierarchy,” in order to “civilize” the urban spaces of Rio de Janeiro.\textsuperscript{75} In 1896, police chief Luiz Bartholomeu de Souza e Silva began a targeted campaign against the city’s prostitutes, which was informed by these racial beliefs.\textsuperscript{76} He used laws against pandering to force the removal of “landladies who rented to prostitutes” during Rio’s urban renewal.\textsuperscript{77} Police were later granted unchecked authority to limit the activities of prostitutes “as [they deemed] best for the… public morality.”\textsuperscript{78} When the pandering law changed in 1915 to include any establishment which tolerated prostitution, police began a larger campaign to relocate prostitutes to “tolerance zones” at the edges of the city.\textsuperscript{79} The efforts of police and jurists to sanitize Brazil’s capital city reflected larger issues of class and race, and exposed tensions between traditional and modern gender ideals.

In her discussion of Mangue, Brazil’s “infamous red-light district,” Sueann Caulfield details how a collection of run-down buildings became home to Rio’s poor, Afro-Brazilian prostitutes.\textsuperscript{80} After 1920, the locale was frequented by young, lower- and middle-class men.
By contrast, the Lapa area, known for its “bohemian nightlife,” was where high-class European women did business with “middle- and upper-middle-class men” wishing to escape “the confinement of bourgeois family life.” Caulfield argues that regulation of prostitution in Rio de Janeiro was tied to larger projects of “public morality” and national “progress and civilization,” though police efforts to restrict the activities of conspicuous or public women proved to be contentious.

Public concern about prostitution embodied many contradictions between the sexual ideals and customs of elite men, and their ideology on citizenship and civil liberty, while exposing conflicts between law enforcement and jurists. However, police prejudice in the relocation of women, based largely upon race and class distinctions, are, as Sueann Caulfield acknowledges, reflective of “elite ideals for the nation.” While “francesa and mulata [women] were tolerated and even admired,” poor “polacas” and dark-skinned “pretas” were seen as objects of degradation and scandal within Rio de Janeiro’s elite society. Further, Pereira’s work demonstrates that many of those suspected as prostitutes by police “were actually factory workers, cooks, or laundresses.” These modern women excited elite fears of “moral contamination” in urban spaces, “social mixture” between the classes, “and lack of control” over behavior.

In one reaction to this fear, jurist Viveiros de Castro upheld social and legal “control over various groups that would not be granted full citizenship” due to their perceived lack of honor, by actively separating “crimes against honor from crimes against morality.” As the legal structures to repress prostitution were used to exert greater “control over not only locales of prostitution but collective housing in general,” they posed a risk for those “who lived near prostitutes,” namely the working and lower classes. Pereira asserts that pandering trials revealed prostitutes not as part of a “low-life underworld,” but an extension of Rio’s working class. The clandestine nature of sexual commerce left these women with a very low social status and an undoubtedly precarious existence. Ironically, prostitution was sustained by upper and middle class men whose wives were often tied to domestic roles, some of whom may have even participated in the women’s suffrage movements of the 1920s and 30s.
Ultimately, the repression of prostitution in Rio was not successful. Police regulation of women in the Mangue and Lapa areas was not supported by the courts, and prostitutes often exploited this legal conflict for their own benefit. Because the Brazilian legal system took an “abolitionist” approach to prostitution, it chose not to regulate or criminalize the commercial sex trade. Pereira argues that police intervention and city renovation actually made prostitutes “more visible than ever” by the mid-1910s, as they began conducting business on the street and in hotels rather than private homes. Sueann Caulfield explains that “in the late 1930s… public health officials estimated the number of prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro at 20,000 to 30,000,” although fewer than 1,500 were registered with the police by 1942. By contrast, only 39,655 women were listed on the 1940 Brazil national census as working in the “liberal professions.” Law enforcement experienced a shift in its authority when in 1937, the Vargas regime gave Rio’s police chief full support to regulate prostitution; sex workers now had to “carry identity cards” while police shut down brothels outside of Mangue. In reality, the “vast majority of [Rio’s] prostitutes… were not confined by police… regulation,” which was often used to punish women deemed “unsightly or insubordinate” by police. While some women were relocated to Mangue or Lapa by police, “most continued to work clandestinely in ‘moralized’ areas, hiding from or bribing patrol officers.” Up to and beyond the Estado Novo, women traded sex with men of all classes throughout Brazil’s capital. Prostitutes may have had some influence on the views held by upper- and working-class men regarding women and appropriate sexual behavior, and their presence certainly contributed to shifts in the ideology behind elite gender ideals.

A study of the body of literature on Brazil’s women and their social roles reveals that elite society, industry, and government all reinforced and reproduced systems of oppression and subjugation based on gender. Race and class divisions can be seen clearly in both the women’s movement of upper classes and the experiences of working- and lower-class women. Although prostitutes did find some autonomy in regards to their familial roles and their social relationships, they too were subject to the protection and control of the paternal state. The feminist movement advanced education and employment for women, but the benefits of these efforts fell largely to women of the upper- and middle-class, while working
and poor women, especially women of color, continued to struggle. Women’s entrance into the workforce changed their perspectives on gender relations, civil rights, and feminine ideals, and contributed greatly to their political involvement. Although the work done by women for their own advancement during the early twentieth century was curtailed by the Estado Novo, early activists did succeed in bringing women’s issues into public discussion. It is because of these women that the feminist movement of the 1980s in Brazil was the most successful in South America.\textsuperscript{99}
Endnotes


4 Hahner, 23.
5 Ibid., 25.
6 Ibid., 134.
7 Besse, 164.
8 Hahner, 144-46.
9 Besse, 175-76.
10 Ibid., 164.
11 Ibid., 165.
12 Deutsch, 224.
13 Ibid., 225.
14 Besse, 185-86.
15 Deutsch, 236; 242.
16 Ibid., 241.
17 Ibid., 242.
18 Besse, 186
19 Deutsch, 243.
20 Ibid., 244.
21 Besse, 179-80.
22 Ibid., 43-4.
23 Ibid., 44-5.
24 Ibid., 45.
26 Ibid., 148-49.
27 Ibid., 206-07.
28 Ibid., 120.
29 Ibid., 97.
30 Ibid., 207.
31 Ibid., 159;174.
32 Ibid., 177.
33 Weinstein, 72.
34 Veccia, 101.
35 Besse, 7-8.
36 Hahner, 3.
37 Ibid., 111-13.
38 Ibid., 113.
39 Besse, 10.
95 Caulfield, 95.
96 Ibid., 95.
97 Ibid., 92.
98 Pereira, 289.
99 Hahner, 205.