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# Working Conditions of Brazilian Housecleaners in Massachusetts: A Joint Research Project of the UMass Boston-Brazilian Immigrant Center Partnership

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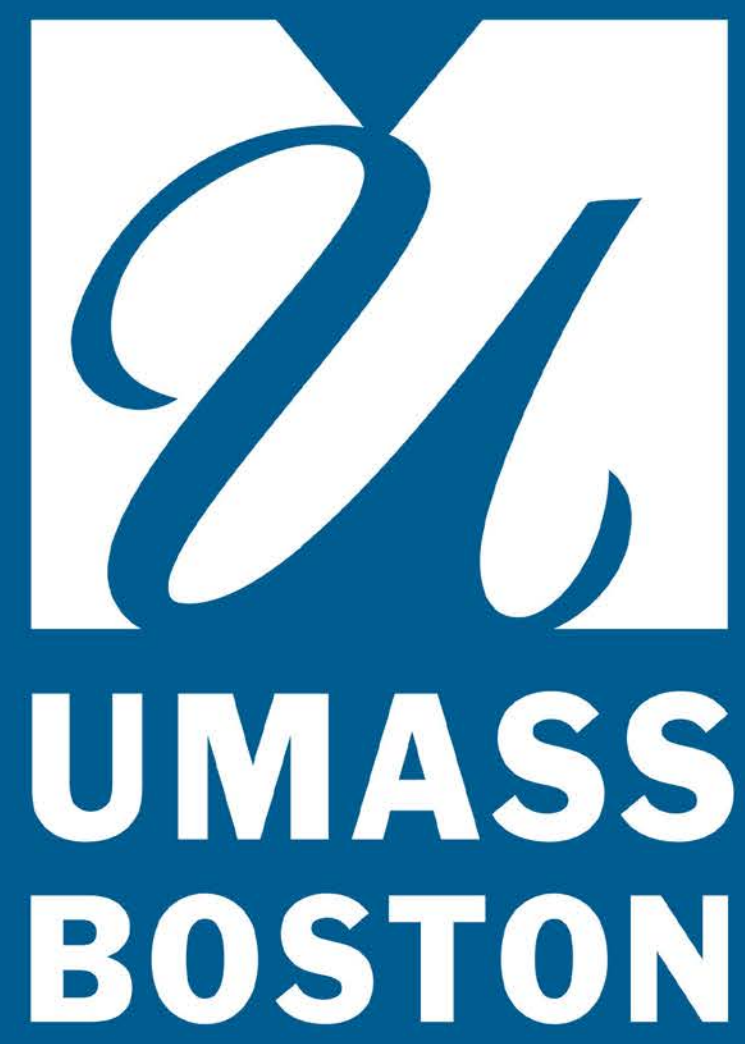
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# Working Conditions of Brazilian Housecleaners in Massachusetts

## A Joint Research Project of the UMass Boston-Brazilian Immigrant Center Partnership

- Tim Sieber, Professor, Anthropology; Board Member, Brazilian Immigrant Center
- Natalicia Tracy, Lecturer, Sociology; Executive Director, Brazilian Immigrant Center
- Eduardo Siqueira, Associate Professor, College of Public and Community Service and Gastón Institute

### Introduction



#### A SOCIAL PROFILE OF BRAZILIAN HOUSECLEANERS IN MASSACHUSETTS

*Research Questions: What are the working and living conditions of Brazilian housecleaners in the major Brazilian communities of Massachusetts? What working conditions do they perceive to be the most problematic in their work life?*

A domestic worker is a person who works within their employer's household. Domestic workers perform a variety of household services for an individual or family, from providing care for children and elderly dependents to cleaning and household maintenance, known as housekeeping. Globally there are over 52.6 million domestic workers, 2.5 million in the United States and over 100,000 in Massachusetts. Domestic work is the most common job Brazilian immigrant women perform in the U.S., regardless of their educational and economic background.

### Goals and Objectives

- 1- To inform responsive social policy initiatives, especially advocacy for the MA Domestic Worker Bill of Rights now under consideration by the Massachusetts legislature during its 2013-2014 session.
- 2- To clarify types and extent of workplace problems, such as wage theft, and lack of information about worker's rights.
- 3- To develop workshops and trainings to address some of the findings, especially related to workplace safety and health, and workers' rights.

### Approaches and Methods

#### Methodology: A Community-Led Social Survey

Ten domestic workers were trained at UMass Boston in survey research methods and conducted face-to-face interviews with other domestic workers across the state of Massachusetts. Respondents needed to be 18 years of age or older, have worked as a housecleaner in the previous month, and live in Massachusetts. The interviews and the survey instrument were in Portuguese. Field work took place between May and September 2013. The survey has 14 demographic questions and another 43 on working conditions. It has generated 193 variables.

#### Geographic location: MA Areas of Highest Brazilian Population

- 1) Greater Boston, including North and South Shores;
- 2) MetroWest;
- 3) Cape Cod (Survey respondents were residents of 54 towns and cities.)

**Sampling:** Convenience and snowball sampling within specific MA geographic areas, involving only housecleaners.

**Target number of Surveys: 200** Number completed: 198

### Impact and Findings

Brazilian women currently or formerly working as housecleaners at training session in survey research methods, with Project Director and trainer Natalicia Tracy (at center of photo in black jacket), at the Sociology Department of the University of Massachusetts Boston, March 2013. The training, the research instrument, and face-to-face interviews of respondents were all done in Portuguese.



- There is a **high level of wage theft**, related to poorly defined job duties and hours, chronic "job creep," and lack of contracts. Several provisions in the Bill of Rights aim to remedy these problems.
- Though housecleaner income is essential for support of most workers' families, both in the U.S. and abroad, they are **often discharged suddenly**, without notice, and left without work for weeks when families go on vacation without notifying them, or abruptly decide they no longer need their services. Employers do not always take note that these are real jobs for people through which they make a living for themselves and others.
  - 81% of our survey respondents used their earnings to support other people apart from themselves.
  - In almost half the cases (45%), the worker supported an additional two or more people.
  - Almost half (44.2%) also send remittances to Brazil to support family members there.
- There is a **high level of exposure to toxic products** and little knowledge or practice about alternatives or how housecleaners can protect themselves.
- There is a modest level of **unacceptable harassment, disrespectful treatment, and arbitrary and punitive employer decisions** that affect job security – such as, firing a worker for being pregnant, for asking for a raise, or for staying home with a sick child or parent, or reducing their pay if something is broken in the house.

#### Public Dissemination:

The survey's findings were released at a press conference at UMass Boston on November 7, 2013, and the event was covered in *The Boston Globe*, and by Latin American television networks in Brazil and Venezuela.

The Boston Globe

#### West

### Survey's results fuel a push to protect domestic workers

By Kathleen Barge | GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 17, 2013

A survey of Brazilian housecleaners around Massachusetts found that 97 percent of them did not have written contracts with their bosses. About 53 percent said they did not receive any breaks, not even for eating, during the work day. And 44 percent said they did not earn enough money to pay for their basic needs.

A preliminary analysis of responses from 187 housecleaners, including some in Framingham and other communities west of Boston, is helping advocates for

### Conclusion/Next Steps

It is important to recognize, of course, that the major forms of abuse and mistreatment experienced by housecleaners and other domestic workers do not reduce to interpersonal hostility from employers. It is instead primarily due to the vulnerability that workers are subjected to by the structural circumstances of their employment, especially that their work is not legally considered a "real work," and thus subject to the regulations that govern most other worksites in our economy. The proposed Massachusetts Domestic Worker's Bill of Rights will extend to housecleaners and other domestic workers the same worker's rights that other kinds of employees have already been long entitled to under current state and federal labor laws. We will also continue to use these findings to educate workers on how to be safe at the workplace, and to raise general public awareness of inadequate domestic working conditions, including wage theft, verbal abuse, etc.

Before going into the field with the survey instrument, surveyors first met at St. Anthony's Church in Everett in order to pilot it through interviewing one another, refine the questions to be asked, and coordinate the planning for their field work.



### Partnership Info and Thanks

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*The Brazilian Immigrant Center research team:* **Natalicia Tracy, Lenita Carmo, Andrea Gouveia, Marcela Elerate, Danielle Villela, Tim Sieber.**

*Domestic Worker Field Surveyors:* **Lenita Carmo, Angela Sena, Anneliese Macedo, Daniela Serrano, Danielle Villela, Fátima Chraska, Luci Santos Morris, Marcela de Paula, Orisania Milli, Rosario Swaidan, Tatiana Pinho, Denise Daly.**

*Project Advisory Committee:* UMass Boston Professors Tim Sieber (Anthropology) and Eduardo Siqueira (CPCS and Gastón Institute); **Elisa Tristan**, MD, Cambridge Health Alliance; **Linda Burnham**, National Research Coordinator, NDWA; **Luciano Ramos** and **Kathleen Banfield**, **UMass Boston Office of Community Partnerships**; and all the Domestic Worker respondents.

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*Portrait Photos:* **Mario Quiroz**, in the traveling exhibition, "Domestic Workers: The Invisible Wheels that Empower our Economy."

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