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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
*University of Massachusetts Boston, tim.siever@umb.edu*

Natalicia Tracy
*Brazilian Immigrant Center*

Eduardo Siqueira
*University of Massachusetts Boston, carlos.siqueira@umb.edu*

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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 written 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; and 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

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.

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.

Western Massachusetts

Survey’s results fuel a push to protect domestic workers

A survey of 105 housecleaners around Massachusetts found that 57 percent of those did not have written contracts with their houses. About 43 percent said they did not receive any breaks, not even for eating, during the work day. About 43 percent said they did not earn enough money to pay for their household needs.

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

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 be safe at the workplace, and to raise general public awareness of inadequate domestic working conditions, including wage theft, verbal abuse, etc.

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, Annilee Macedo, Daniela Serrano, Danielle Villela, Fatima Chruska, Luci Santos Morris, Marcela de Paula, Orisiana 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, NDI; 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.”

Contact Info: Natalicia Tracy (ed@braziliancenter.org or natalicia.tracy@umb.edu); Tim Sieber (tim.sieber@umb.edu); Eduardo Siqueira (carlos.siqueira@umb.edu); Susan Moor (susan.moor@umb.edu)