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## SLS-4 THE AMERICAS

*Susan Sterner is a Fellow of the Institute writing and photographing the lives and status of Brazilian women.*

# Ana & Angelica

## — Part III —

SÃO JOSÉ DOS CAMPOS, São Paulo, Brazil

March 1, 1999

### Part III Introduction

Through her Portuguese-language teacher, Yelva, ICWA Fellow Susan Sterner met two sisters-in-law, Ana and Angelica, who work as housemaids in Yelva's middle-class house in São José dos Campos, a small industrial city outside São Paulo, Brazil. Angelica is



*Ana (left) and Angelica*

married to Ana's brother Carlos, a former soldier in the Brazilian Army, and has four children: Luciana, 20, Erika, 17, Breno, 10 and Israel, 3.

Ana, mother of a 25-year-old daughter, Claudia, is separated from a violent husband, and lives part of the time with her boyfriend, part of the time with her father.

In Part I of this series of reports on the lives, families and attitudes of Ana and Angelica, Susan spent a day with them as they carried out their duties in Yelva's house, then walked home to Angelica's house. There she met Angelica's sons, Breno and Israel. Also waiting for her was Lucas, 2, the son of 17-year-old Erika.

In Part II, Susan and her husband Tyrone attended a Sunday party at Angelica's house; Susan and Ana spent a Thursday with Claudia at the home of Ana's father; and Susan put in another house-working day with Ana and Angelica in the home of her teacher, Yelva.

In Part III, the conclusion of the series, Angelica tells Susan and Tyrone about her alienation from Carlos and her infatuation with a Catholic priest. Erika seeks a new career path and Susan considers the lives and dilemmas of Brazilian women with a mother-daughter duo who serve at a crisis center for women.

### A HANDSOME PRIEST AND A BROKEN HEART

A few days after my visit with Ana at her father's home, as Tyrone and I were walking home in the evening, we came upon Angelica and Ana walking to their bus stop. It was the first time they had seen Tyrone in a long while and they insisted that we stop to get a drink and visit for a while. It was a Friday and neither of them worried about getting up early the next morning, or getting home too early that night.

We stopped at a little outdoor bar near the bus stop. Ana insisted on "just one beer" and cajoled Tyrone into splitting it with her. Ana explained that



*Angelica plays with her youngest son, Israel, during a quiet moment the last time I saw her. For Angelica her children are the pride and center of her life.*

she would start a new job as a parking attendant the following Monday. She was very excited about the chance to keep earning money. Angelica floated over to the counter and picked out a *salgadinho* (salty snack) to her liking. She returned to the table and sat absently, nibbling at her snack and half-listening to the conversation.

I turned to Angelica and teased her about Carlos, using the same phrases she always used about Tyrone. "Oh Angelica, where's Carlos? Aren't you worried about him?"

"Worried?" She looked at me quizzically.

"Aren't you worried about him alone? How will he eat? What about the Brazilian women?"

"No, I'm not worried. No," she replied. She shot a quick glance at Ana. She sipped her mineral water and looked away.

"Tell her, Angelica," interjected Ana. "She wants to know what life is like for Brazilian woman. We have to tell her everything."

Angelica laughed and looked down nervously. "I'm not worried about him because I don't love him. I like him. I don't love him any more. My love for him ended

about the time I had Breno eleven years ago."

Ana saw this as a sign to settle in. She ordered another beer as Angelica painted an image of her marriage to Carlos and her broken heart.

"When a person loves another, nothing is work. The things you do for them are easy because you love them. I cared for him with complete tenderness and love. But then it changed and I started to feel frustrated when I had to cook and clean up after him. I did it because I had to do it. I told him that a life with a man like him is hard.

"At first I loved him a lot. He treated me very well. We were very happy. Now we speak about only the basics: just the money we earn together and our children. That's it. I don't feel any tenderness for him. He's a street man. Before, we would fight because I wanted to go out with him at night. Now we fight because I want him to just go out and leave me alone."

She sighed and looked to Ana for support. Ana nodded.

Angelica went on. "In the beginning we loved each other very much. Everything was passionate. He was so handsome. We met in a plaza very near here. He was in his [army] uniform and looked very nice. He started talking to me,

flirting with me. I felt beautiful. We were very happy for many years. It was a good marriage.

"I started to get unhappy before I was pregnant with Breno. I adore the Virgin Mary. I pray a lot. For me she's everything: mother, friend, companion. One day I want to be a preacher. I want to do it. I am studying about the Bible. I read a lot. I can't separate from my husband because it would be a sin. I don't want to sin. Ana thinks it will be better if I leave Carlos and not a sin because I'll make life better for my children.

"Still, it's difficult to live with a man like Carlos because he's not a companion. I think my children's lives would be better if he just went away. The uncertainty would be gone... His body is in the house, but his soul is somewhere else. He talks to nobody when he comes home. He's either drinking in a bar, or sitting in front of the television.

"Sometimes I would look at him and get very sad. I longed for the years we had before. Now I just try not to think about it. My marriage is falling apart and I know that in his heart he's already left me, he's gone. Oh, Sweet Lord, I fought with him. I fought to keep it going. Now I'm tired and I don't like fighting. I don't want any more of it.

"When I became pregnant with Breno I became crazy with the idea that I was going to die in childbirth. I was really afraid of dying. I started going to mass all the time. I looked for God to protect me. So, when I didn't die, I was very happy. I think God talked to me then. Everything was great.

"I left the hospital and forgot all about being scared and needing God. For two years I just lived. Then one day I felt the need to go to mass again, so I went. I entered the church and was ready for mass. There was a new priest. He was beautiful, mulatto, and young. *Ai Meu Deus!* [My Lord!] She bit her lip and shook her head a little."

Angelica let out a breath of air, "I was crazy for this guy. I was falling in love with this priest and didn't realize it. I went to mass all the time. I suffered greatly during this period. I even started trying to meet him during other times — volunteering at the church, scheduling confessions and counseling sessions.

"One day I called him and asked if he could give me a special confession. I went to the church. He was so calm



*Lucas, left, and Israel take a break from the heat and play in the shower. When the air gets dusty and the sun is strong these two head to the showers at least three times a day.*

and nice. When I sat near him I started to speak and then to cry. He had been a priest for only six months, but I told him everything. I talked with him about my childhood, my father, my husband, my marriage and my children. I even told him I had been an adulteress myself. I just talked and talked and cried and cried. As I talked with him I felt a huge weight, like a rock, lift off my chest. I felt light.

"He talked with me a lot. I knew I couldn't fall in love with him. God talked with me then. I knew I didn't love my husband any more, either. To this day I still speak to the priest often. I respect him because he didn't get involved with me. I think God put this priest in my path and made him very handsome so I would listen to him.

"Now I feel very vulnerable. I feel the absence of a man in my life because of Carlos. I fight with Jesus about this. He [Jesus] can do anything. I ask him for a better husband and He does nothing. I don't know how long to live like this."

Ana looked over at Angelica and threw back the last of her beer. She said, "It's not a sin to leave him, you should make your life better. Even if he is my brother, things will be better without him." She got up and went over to the bar and returned a few minutes later with a small glass of murky, homemade *pinga*. Angelica was irritated when she saw this and protested that *pinga* is what has ruined Ana's life.

Ana waved away the protest and replied, "If I were a man, I would marry Angelica. She and I should get married. We would treat each other better."

Angelica doubled over in laughter at this. "How can

we get married? We don't have a single penis between us!"

## A CERTAIN INDEPENDENCE

On my last Sunday in São José I went to visit Angelica. I arrived and found the house cool and tranquil. Carlos was nowhere to be found and I knew she liked it that way. Angelica was happy to see me and updated me on family news. The unsettling note was that Ana hadn't been heard from since the night she bought herself a *pinga* at the bus-stop bar. She never showed up for work at the parking lot. "We're going to lose her to *pinga*, Susana. We're going to lose her to the street."

Angelica's 17-year-old daughter Erika came into the room and Angelica asked us to walk up to the store to buy some pasta for lunch. As we walked, Erika seemed tired. She said that sometimes taking care of Israel and Lucas exhausted her. I asked what it was like to be pregnant around the same time her mother was. (Erika's brother Israel was born in July 1996, her own son Lucas in August of 1997.)

"My mother knew I was pregnant before I did. I was three months pregnant when I found out. She already knew. She knew the signs. I was more or less happy when I found out I was pregnant. I had a hard pregnancy because I am asthmatic. There's lots of dust and dirt around here. I was pregnant during the dry months, which made

it worse. I suffered from the heat, too."

We turned a corner and she waved to a girlfriend. The friend paused for a minute to watch as we walked along, me scribbling in a notebook with a camera hanging on my shoulder. Erika continued, "The guy that I was with doesn't want to know Lucas. It doesn't matter to me. I didn't like him enough, anyway. Lucas and I don't need him. This way it's more tranquil. My mother knows how to support me. She helps me. If I didn't have her help, I'd be in the streets."

"I don't feel obligated to help her, I just want to. I want to stay with my mother. I don't have the impulse to marry now. I have seen too much bad in marriage. I've seen the way my mother and aunt suffer."

Standing in front of a soda display, Erika pulled down two bottles of Guaraná soda and turned to me. "I have a friend, she married her boyfriend. She said everything was beautiful before marrying him. Now her husband yells at her if she says anything. He goes out whenever he wants. Returns whenever he wants. If the food isn't ready, he screams at her. She has to guess what he wants. Read his needs. She's only 19. My age! Look what she's done to herself."

We checked out and walked back to the house. "I've seen how my father has treated my mother, too. We like him but we're not very close to him. She's



*Erika, 17, hugs her son Lucas, 2, under the eyes of the Virgin Mary, a strong presence in the household. Erika left the street just before she learned she was pregnant. Now she wants to live with her mother and return to school to study medicine.*



*Erika carries her brother Israel back to the house where a weepy Lucas awaits them. Caring for the two toddlers wears her out, but she likes the fact that she's helping her mother and has a safe place to care for her son.*

cried too much for us to love him anymore.

Back at the house Erika told Angelica what we'd been talking about. Angelica nodded. "I talked with her about contraception when she asked. Then, when I knew she was pregnant I thought it was normal. Brazilian girls aren't very careful. She knew how to not to be pregnant. She didn't use contraception. Now she has Lucas. She has no contact with his father. He doesn't want to see her or Lucas. She was sad at first. Now she's strong, very strong. Aren't you, Erika?"

"Yes, he said it to my own mother's face. He said Lucas is not his son."

Angelica poured us fresh lemonade and ushered us out of the kitchen so we could sit and keep talking. "She asks crazy questions, Erika does. Talk to her. Tell her what you're going to do on Monday."

I looked at Erika expectantly and smiled. "Well?"

"I'm going to begin studies again. I'm going to be a doctor. First I have to end my secondary schooling. Then a course for the *vestibulario* [college entrance exam]. It will take six years more before I can go to the university...I've

wanted to be a doctor for a long time. I want to take care of other people.

"I left school when I was 13. I went out to clubs. I lived in the streets. I learned a lot of bad things in the street. I did drugs, drank. It was hard to leave the street. I drank a lot. My mother and I fought a lot. She was afraid I was going to die in the streets.

"Sometimes I would sleep in the house and leave at dawn. Sometimes I would stay out all night and come home to sleep all day. Most of the time I stayed on the streets. I would go for days without sleeping.

"I came to see my brother Israel after he was born. He was three weeks old. My mother cried and cried. I was really thin. I had been without seeing her for three months. I don't like remembering this.

"I left the streets a month before I knew I was pregnant." She lowered her voice, "Many of my friends have children and they stay in the streets. One died. I don't know where the baby is. Another has a baby the same age as Israel. Some just left their babies with their mothers and went back to the street. Drugs are too strong for them to leave. Cocaine is the easiest to get. I used it a lot.

It's cheap. You can get everything else, too.

"My time in the streets was hard. It was worth it because I learned life there. But if I could, I would change everything. I would have finished school. I would rather have done that than have the memories I have now.

"I don't want to get married. I'll stay with my mother, we'll have a house together. We can help each other and I'll go to school at night.

"What do I dream for Lucas? I don't think in the future for him."

## MY QUESTIONS

After all this time spent with Angelica, Ana, Claudia and Erika my head spun. I wondered if cycles of alcoholism, infidelity, violence and dissatisfaction with their lives were typical of Brazilian women, or whether I had just wandered into a wonderful but particularly roughed-up family. I was impressed by the strength of these women and impressed by the bonds between mother and daughter.

Indeed it was the women who kept the families linked together. Angelica was Ana's guardian, the one who would ask about her in the streets if she had gone off drinking, while Ana was Angelica's sounding board

about her marriage. Both found strength in the lives and memories of their mothers. Their daughters and sisters were likewise part of their support network, and often pulled together to help each other. Claudia and Erika saw their mothers in need of help at the same time that they were safe harbors. Both thought life would be better if they could just set up house with their mothers, raise children and forget about men for a while. This said something about their opinions of the suffering and violence in their mothers' lives and a wish to avoid the same path. It also spoke of their low opinion of marriage.

Functioning like release valves, the homes were fluid combinations of people. When a situation became uncomfortable, as in the case with Ana and her husband or Erika and her mother, they would leave and find a temporary home in the family network. When Zezinho or Carlos came down from their highs or tired of the streets they had a place to rest. It was also the women of the families who would jump on buses and ride across town to check up on other parts of the family. This was the only way to make sure everyone was ok, because no one had private phone lines. (Except Angelica, when working at Yelva's home during the week.) They helped each other cook and do laundry. Cooperative effort was very present, but never articulated. Claudia even took it upon herself to check on her younger cousins and nieces or nephews to make sure they were eating well. If they were hungry she would bring them to her grandfather's house



*Angelica presses her hand against Ana to stop her from trying to punch Zezinho again. Ana had become drunk and violent from drinking potent cocktails called caipirinhas.*

to play for the day and feed them.

Despite this interconnectedness and support, each time I asked any of them if women rely on each other, they responded negatively, as if it were unnecessary. I wasn't sure what all of this meant. Nor was I able to really understand how such a network of women was unable to support each other in actually stepping away from their unhappy situations. What kept Angelica in her unhappy marriage? What kept Ana in a lifelong cycle of violence? They were unable to articulate these answers for me. Ana claimed alcohol was to blame in her life, and Angelica was waiting for an answer from Heaven. In the end they each seemed immobilized.

#### EPILOGUE: "RUIM COM ELE, PIOR SIM ELE"

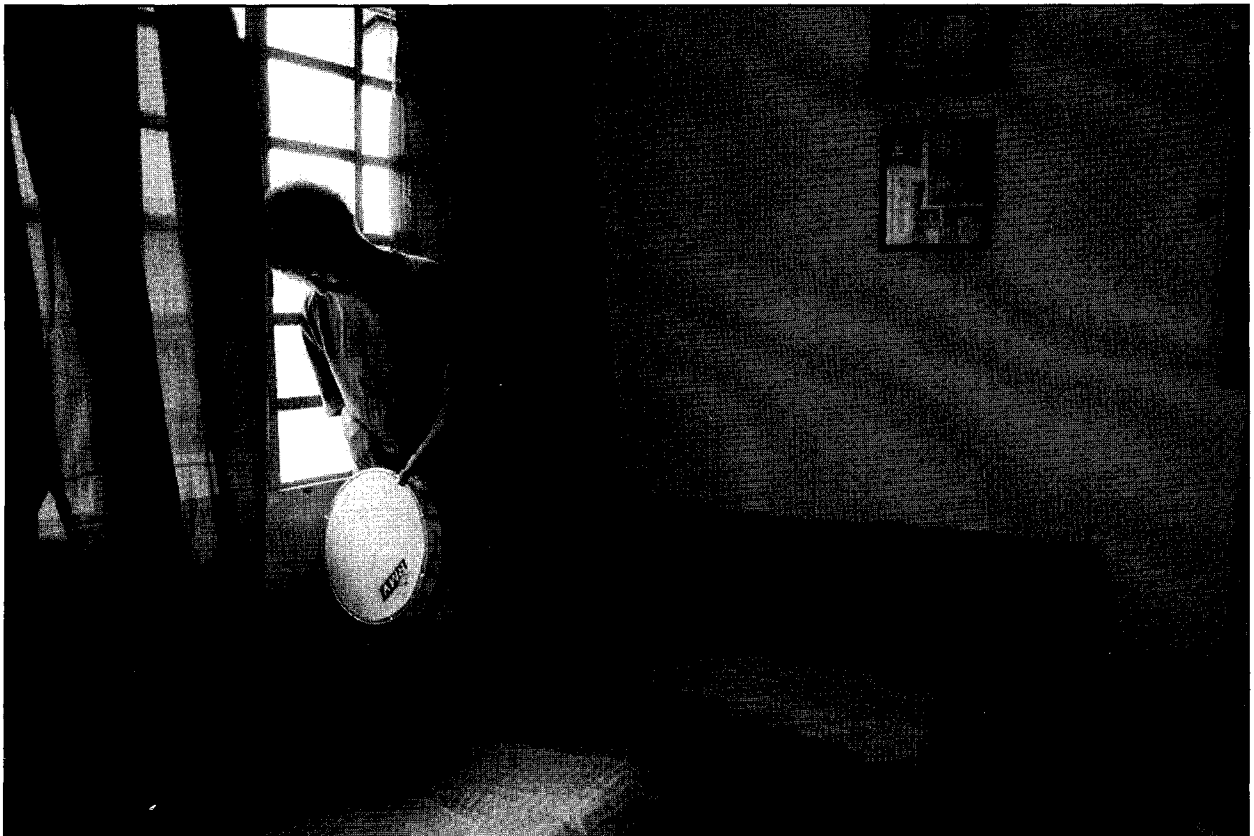
On one of my last days in São José dos Campos I was stood up by a social worker who had agreed to meet me and help me sort out my thoughts. Disappointed, I decided to find a place to grab a cold drink and write in my journal. Criss-crossing through streets near the center I glanced up and saw the sign SOS Mulher, the crisis center Ana had visited after her husband burned her. I popped in and ended up meeting yet another mother-daughter duo whose lives were very different from those of the Nascimento family, but not unaffected by the same problems. Their responses to my questions, while one-

sided, and off-the-cuff, were illuminating and are part of my initial impressions of the lives of Brazilian women.

SOS Mulher, a nongovernmental organization, occupies an old house in the downtown area of São José dos Campos. The entrance is monitored by an armed policewoman who is cordial but strict about keeping out people just looking for place to hang out. The lobby, or former living room, is decorated with advocacy posters calling for Brazil to respect its women, care for children and recognize its African heritage. About 50 women walk through the doors each day seeking help. SOS services over 7,000 women each year, most of whom live on an annual income of between R\$2,880 to R\$10,080 (U.S.\$1,440 to \$5,040).

According to their 1998 statistics, 78 percent of the women who sought help from SOS Mulher came because of domestic violence (physical and psychological), 12 percent came for help getting the father's of their children to pay child support, 3 percent for legal help in getting the father's to acknowledge their children, 2 percent for sexual violence from their mates, and 2 percent because of rape.

I asked to speak to someone who could tell me about SOS's work with the women of São José and was introduced to a mother and daughter team, Alisone and



*Ten-year-old Breno, Angelica's oldest son, plays with the tambourine in their living room. Shy and lonely, he suffers the most from Carlos' frequent absences, says Angelica.*

Leiticia Massula. Alisone takes initial interviews and evaluates the needs of the women who seek help with SOS. Leiticia, 27, an attorney, works with legal issues and gives workshops on women's rights.

While Leiticia attended to a client, Alisone and I retreated to the community kitchen for coffee. She poured herself a strong cup and lit a cigarette. We pulled little stools from under the counter and talked there as other members of the staff floated through for their morning coffee.

With all of the questions I had buzzing around in my head I decided to ask Alisone a few basic ones and see where she would take the conversation. I asked her to tell me what defines the lives and identities of the Brazilian women she works with and knows, and to define the stigmas Brazilian women fear most.

Alisone inhaled deeply on the cigarette and raised her eyebrows. She exhaled and tried to place Brazilian women in a world context, "I'll answer your questions from my personal point of view, no? We're in a time of change and confusion for women all over the world. It's not just here but everywhere. Women don't know what they are or what they want to be or want to have. It's always been this way. You're born into a culture that determines how you think. It's hard to fight against that.

"... Society determines how women think of themselves. Who forms society? It hasn't been women. The woman has been the recipient of a culture, not a participant. It has been determined by men for most of the time.

"...Brazil is very different from other countries. Brazil began on the margins of a colonial economy. The men here weren't independent, they were suppressed under the law of another land, their women were under them and under everyone was the black slave woman. The black woman was used by everyone. She cleaned the houses, cooked the meals. She was the maid. And she was the sexual object of the white man. Everything was forced on her by men—white and black.

"Understanding her place, and her role in the history of this country illustrates many aspects of life for the Brazilian woman of today. You can begin to understand the conflicts felt in society and within each woman pertaining to gender identity. Race, too.

"The Christian culture of Europe was very repressive. Women didn't have control of their own lives or bodies. They were forbidden to feel sensuality. Men were not able to violate white women either, or rather they did not turn to white women for sensuality. That type of pleasure was a sin. For this pleasure men turned to African women. This implied a lesser value of the African woman. This idea was strong all the way through our colonization, and until well after World War Two. Now,

it is not just about white and black. Now it is about married and unmarried women, black or white."

"Today within a marriage sex and sensuality are just as badly managed. Both sexes perpetuate the legacy. When a man wants sex he goes outside the marriage a lot, maybe to a prostitute. It's thought of as natural for him to do this. The women think so, too. They help perpetuate the very thing they destroys their marriage. It's just accepted that there are two types of women — the one a man marries and the one he enjoys.

"All her life a woman learns that sex is a sin. She lives her life this way. To have sex is to be dirty, to be less. This idea is deep within her. She doesn't have her own voice. These ideas come from culture and society. It's the motive of the conflict.

"Women, I think try to find their own compromise. But add to this the issue of the Brazilian economy and their survival. Most women don't have a good-paying job that can support her and her children... What can you do with a 40-year-old, illiterate woman with no work experience and seven children? Can you really tell her leave her husband? Here in Brazil women live in the shadow of the expression, "*Ruim com ele, pior sem ele.*" (Bad with him, worse without him.) Women define themselves by being with a man. They're afraid of their own independence!

"A Brazilian woman wants to be independent at the same time she wants a traditional marriage. She sets up a conflict for herself without realizing it. She justifies the way things are and becomes complicit in what her husband does...To change all of this in Brazil will take time. It will change day by day in the lives of each woman, but it will be slow. Education is the fundamental issue.

"For the size of our population, very few women are educated well. If a family has enough money to educate only one child, of course the money will go to the son. If the daughter is in school too, but the family needs more money, she's the first one that will have to stop. Families don't value the development of their daughters. The mothers think the same as the fathers."

For Leiticia, Alisone's daughter, women's financial dependence, lack of respect for their own bodies, and ignorance about their rights debilitate women generation after generation. "The [1988] constitution is very modern. It's just that in practice we don't have real equality with men. It will be a long road walked before women get in practice what is written that they should have. Little things erode the law all the time"

She gives an example of the ways in which women are undermined and kept dependent. "There used to be law saying that if a man had a child and did not pay for that child to have food, he would go to prison. It was a



*Israel looks out through a block-glass window of their home.*

great leverage over him. A man would not pay and would not pay, making the mother crazy, and then the day the police were to take him to prison the money would appear like magic. Now the laws are different. A man can put off paying for a long time, weeks and months. Jail isn't a threat. Women and children lose."

Leiticia continues, "It's hard for the system to see when something has been done to a woman, or a girl even, that is wrong. Statutory rape is big problem here. There was just a case in court about a eleven-year-old girl who was having relations with a twenty-plus-year-old man. The judge overseeing the case ruled that that wasn't rape because the girl wanted to be with the man. How is that right? How can an eleven-year-old know what she wants? How many more exception will the court make? In this sense there is no respect for women.

"How can women without money fight for their rights? What will give them the time to think beyond survival? This is a country that looks for solutions to the First World. Brazilians love to say, 'Look, we're so modern. We're just like Europe and the United States.' Brazil wants to be seen as a great country, so we copy others. We look to those systems for solutions and they don't work here. That is not Brazil. To those who have money the solution doesn't matter. But the rest of the people are on the floor.

"No, our law is very pretty on paper. We're a very pretty people. But in practice, I think everything is going

to get worse and worse. Our mode of thinking is self-destructive. We think it's great to have a president who speaks a lot of languages and travels all over the world. It makes nice pictures on the television. But Brazilians never want to stop and look at what is inside the country. As a culture, we lack in critical thinking. We never think in the future."

I asked Leiticia what all of this means on a day-to-day basis for her and the women she helps. She replied that the women don't arrive looking for an escape from a bad marriage, or a way to revolutionize their lives. That's not part of their thinking, "When women walk in the door to my office they are usually already separated in some way from their husband or *companheiro* [live-in boyfriend or common law husband]. They come here when there's been violence. Something in them has reached a limit. At first it can seem that she wants to get away from him, but really what the woman wants is for the man to behave better. I think she comes here to get help in forcing her man to be a better person for her. Many times the woman wants the man to stop drinking — a very big problem in Brazil is alcoholism — stop being violent, stop being aggressive and hostile. And, to stop going around with other women.

"Unemployment creates a lot of these problems for the men. So much is connected to the economy. A man loses his job, or doesn't earn enough. He spends what he has on alcohol. He has spare time to drink. He drinks a lot. It gets worse. The violence begins. We also have 'weekend alcoholics.' The cycle begins every Friday night.

Still, it's better to have a man that beats you instead of being alone."

As we wrap up our impromptu interview I toss out one last question. Do she and her contemporaries think differently about their lives? She slaps the table and shares one last anecdote that brought Ana and Angelica and their families a little more into perspective for me:

"I was talking with friends of mine. All women, all classmates from law school. We were talking about lesbianism and that it might be better to marry women because there could be more respect and freedom that way. The conversation was crazy. But then what surprised me was that a friend of mine, a women who has been educated as a lawyer and knows about the freedoms she can have, said that at some point she will marry a man, even if she doesn't love him, so that she can have someone to protect and take care of her.

"I was very surprised. If she can still think this way, imagine how the women who come to SOS think. Imagine the ones who aren't brave enough to find help with us."

I imagined Ana and Angelica.

*Susan*



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