

Modernization through Home Economics: The American International Association in Brazil, 1947-1961

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The activities of the American International Association in Brazil and Venezuela have attracted the attention of scholars interested in examining the organization as an example of the complex economic, political, and cultural relationships between the United States and Latin America in the mid-twentieth century. A 2013 historiographic essay by Claiton Marcio da Silva on scholarship concerning the AIA's initiatives in Brazil reveals a particular interest among Brazilian scholars in Nelson Rockefeller's economic and political influence as projected through the AIA and affiliated organizations, including the International Basic Economy Corporation. As da Silva notes, debate within Brazilian scholarship prior to the 1990s primarily centered on whether the AIA was a missionary-like endeavor to foster economic development or an imperialist project to establish North American dominance. With the cultural turn in the 1990s, scholars have complicated this narrative with explorations of Latin American participation in the AIA and IBEC, and these organizations' connections to the broader development of consumer culture.¹ Though scholars have become more interested in examining these organizations from a cultural perspective, recent scholarship remains focused on the AIA's efforts to modernize Brazilian agricultural practices. The organization's efforts to spread modern, North American home economics practices to poor rural and urban households remains largely unexamined.

These efforts are worth further examination, as scholars interested in the relationship between gender and development in twentieth-century Brazil have tended to focus primarily on urban areas. Susan Besse has demonstrated that patriarchal norms favoring a gendered division of labor between married couples had already become established in urban Brazil by the end of the *Estado Novo* (1937-1945). Barbara Weinstein has examined industrialists' efforts to promote home economics and traditional feminine gender roles among working class women in urban São Paulo in the 1940s to 1960s as a way to contain women's expectations for equitable wages.² By comparison, there is relatively little scholarship on postwar efforts to shape gender roles in rural Brazil.

As this report will demonstrate, the dissemination of modern home economics practices to poor households was a central objective of the AIA throughout its activity in Brazil from 1947 to 1961. By spreading knowledge and best practices in nutrition, food preparation, hygiene, sanitation, and childcare, the AIA believed it could contribute to the modernization of Brazilian communities through improved health and raised standards of living among poor households, which would in turn foster greater agricultural and industrial production. Women were central to these initiatives, reflecting contemporary ideas of gendered divisions of labor and North American ideals of domestic femininity. The AIA and its Brazilian affiliates employed female home economists to spread modern practices to Brazilian housewives, who would contribute to their families' well-being through their domestic labor while their husbands worked in the fields or factories.

AIA's Home Demonstration Service

Though most of the AIA's efforts would eventually center on outreach to poor rural Brazilian households through the Associação de Crédito e Assistência Rural (Rural Credit and Assistance Association, ACAR), AIA's earliest home economics initiative focused on improving nutrition in both urban and rural households, and partnered with an existing Brazilian government agency, the Serviço de Alimentação e Previdência Social (Nutrition and Social Welfare Service, SAPS). The AIA's "Home Demonstration Service" was an outgrowth of information gained about the state of Brazilian health, sanitation, and nutrition over the course of the Office of Inter-American Affairs' activities in Brazil during the Second World War. The project, launched in 1947, was based on a study by the American nutritionist Louise Stanley that maintained that malnutrition was a major contributor to high infant mortality and low life expectancy in Brazil. Stanley and AIA personnel concluded that malnutrition in Brazil was due not only to inadequate food supplies, but also to ignorance about nutrition, food

preparation, and childcare. The AIA believed that a home demonstration service to improve household nutrition would complement AIA's efforts to increase food production elsewhere in Brazil.³

The service partnered with SAPS, which the AIA judged to be the most practical and effective nutrition agency in the Brazilian federal government.⁴ One of the populist initiatives of the Getúlio Vargas government, SAPS had been founded in 1940, and by 1947, the agency operated discounted restaurants for workers' families in cities across Brazil.⁵ Nested within SAPS, the home demonstration service would recruit women to serve as "home demonstration agents" who the AIA believed could spread knowledge about home food production and distribute low-cost plants and seeds directly to urban and rural households. AIA hired an American nutritionist who was assigned to SAPS, but the home demonstration agents would themselves be Brazilian women trained at schools in Fortaleza and the interior of the State of São Paulo.⁶ AIA personnel believed that it was important for these women to have a strong understanding of nutrition, and also be able to effectively communicate with poor women:

To work effectively, "home demonstration agents" must be trained in such a way that they talk the "poor folks' language," in order to gain entrance into homes, win the confidence of homemakers, and thus be in a position to give practical help and advice on food selection and preparation, domestic and personal hygiene, child care, feeding and related subjects.⁷

In many respects, the AIA's partnership with SAPS served as a model for its later initiatives in Brazil. The home demonstration service relied on expertise from American-trained professionals, but was staffed primarily by Brazilians. Like later initiatives, the home demonstration service was also centered on sharing resources and responsibilities between the AIA and Brazilian government agencies. Early planning documents provided for contributions from the Brazilian government of approximately US \$100,000, with the AIA contributing

another \$112,500 from 1947 to 1951. AIA's budget primarily covered the salary of an American nutritionist (\$10,000 per year) and scholarships for individuals in Brazil and the United States to receive training in nutrition (\$10,000 per year). The Brazilian government shouldered the remaining outlays.⁸

The home demonstration service's activities began in 1947 and continued to 1950. The AIA hired Marrietta Henderson, a former nutritionist with the Health Division of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in Greece and a faculty member at the Pennsylvania State College, as the nutritionist to work with SAPS. She reorganized courses offered at the Agnes June Leith School at Fortaleza that prepared home demonstration agents to emphasize working with homemakers. In 1948, she also organized training for home demonstration agents in Rio de Janeiro, Niteroi, and Vitória.⁹ In 1949, the service had one to five home demonstration agents active in the cities of Belem, Fortaleza, Natal, Recife, Salvador, Vitória, Niteroi, and Rio de Janeiro. These agents used schools or SAPS restaurants as centers from which to work.

Though the home demonstration service diverged from later efforts focused on rural families by targeting industrial workers, they established practices that later AIA initiatives would adopt, such as outreach to families through women's clubs and children's clubs. In addition to visiting individual family homes, demonstration agents organized women's clubs to address specific topics, "such as more nutritious food from a limited budget; protection of children from hookworm and other parasites; ways to keep children strong and healthy." Home demonstration agents also organized children into clubs whose activities included "cooking demonstrations, simple carpentry, and home vegetable gardening."¹⁰ These clubs were patterned after 4-H clubs and were the antecedents to "4-S" clubs that the AIA would introduce in later initiatives.

Though AIA had prepared plans for the curriculum and facilities of a school in Belo Horizonte, to open in 1950,¹¹ it ultimately terminated its partnership with

SAPS in 1950. The reasons for ending the program are unclear, though miscommunication had characterized AIA's interactions with SAPS from the beginning. By 1950, most of AIA's attention and resources in Brazil had shifted to ACAR in rural Minas Gerais.

The Rural Credit and Assistance Association (ACAR)

ACAR was founded shortly after the home demonstration service began its operations. In 1948, Nelson Rockefeller proposed a program modeled on Roosevelt's depression-era Farm Security Administration to the state government of Minas Gerais. The program was centered on supervised rural credit and technical assistance, and according to Walter Crawford, ACAR's first Director, had as its primary goal "to obtain an increase in the standard of living for the rural populations of Minas."¹² The State of Minas Gerais agreed to a proposal that it match AIA funding for the program: an agreement signed by the governor and AIA on December 6, 1948 established funding for 1949-1951, with each contributing 4,500,000 cruzeiros to the initiative. Minas Gerais chose two members of the administrative board and AIA chose other three, including ACAR's director.¹³

Rural credit was financed by the Caixa Econômica do Estado de Minas Gerais, a state development bank, and provided loans for improving the standard of living of rural families and to incentivize agricultural production. The former included funds for food, clothing, and medical treatment, as well as seeds, fertilizer, farm equipment, and farm animals. Loans could also be used to obtain domestic utensils, for home and farm repairs, and for land improvements.¹⁴

Beyond supervised credit, ACAR provided technical assistance, which included both on-site training related to agriculture for male farmers, and training in

home economics for their wives. This assistance was provided to individuals who received supervised credit, but was also made available to other rural families; in 1950, more than 40 percent of ACAR home visits were made to individuals who had not received a loan. ACAR recruited both male agronomists and female home economists—referred to within the program as “home supervisors”—to make daily trips to rural families to organize demonstrations on agriculture and home economics. Both travelled daily by jeep, horse, or on foot to visit rural families. Though not explicitly stated, ACAR materials imply that male agronomists and female home economists generally travelled as a male-female pair. While agronomists taught farmers effective techniques to improve agricultural production, home economists organized “clubs for women and girls, in which they teach domestic hygiene, nutrition, sewing, manual labor, carpentry.”¹⁵

In addition to home visitations and group demonstrations, ACAR also provided medical and sanitation services in coordination with local health departments. These efforts focused on vaccination against diphtheria, typhoid, and smallpox; treatments for worms; and water sanitation. ACAR’s first Rural Education Center opened in Matozinhos in 1951, and offered free instruction in home economics and agricultural practices.¹⁶

From its earliest days, ACAR’s activities clearly conformed to a gendered division of labor, with male labor assumed to be in the fields, and women’s labor assumed to be within the home, though there is little evidence to suggest that poor rural women were not active participants in agricultural labor. The gender divisions in ACAR’s recruitment of personnel and provision of technical assistance likely reflected contemporary North American gender norms as much, if not more than local expectations for how men and women would divide their labor within rural families.

The AIA and the State of Minas Gerais renewed their agreement after 1951, and over the years, ACAR expanded its presence in Minas Gerais. In subsequent

years, ACAR gradually shifted its outreach efforts from home visitation to group demonstrations, club activities, and mass media communications. In 1952, ACAR founded 4-S (“Saber, Sentir, Servir e Saúde” or Know, Feel, Serve, Health) clubs for children modeled on 4-H clubs in the United States. By 1959, ACAR’s mass media outreach spread information about agriculture and home economics via newspapers, radio, billboards, film expositions, and pamphlets to rural communities across Minas Gerais. ACAR’s annual report from 1959 clarified its mission as one that improved standards of living by teaching “modern practices to the farmer and his family;” the program would “bring to rural families the modern conquests of science and technics, of research and experimentation in the field of agriculture and domestic economy.”¹⁷

This emphasis on modernity reflected a broader national trend to celebrate modernity and progress. Juscelino Kubitschek, who as governor of Minas Gerais had supported ACAR’s activities, was then president of Brazil, and overseeing a large-scale national development project that included the construction of Brasilia, and investment in a national highway system that would facilitate settlement of new farmland in Brazil’s interior. In this context, ACAR portrayed home economics as a way for women to participate actively in the modernization of Brazil’s economy and culture through the application of scientifically informed practices to home administration. An undated brochure that ACAR used to recruit home economists explained that “The goal of home economics is to improve home life: better houses, better food, better equipment, better clothing, better administration, better health habits.” ACAR home economists would contribute to this effort by teaching rural women about topics such as home administration, food production, food preparation, food conservation, sewing, health, sanitation, nursing, and recreation.¹⁸ Though instruction related to raising livestock overlapped with agricultural topics addressed by ACAR’s agronomists, most of these topics clearly related women’s participation in economic development to their labor within the home.

ACAR proved to be a popular program, and one that attracted substantial attention from politicians outside of Minas Gerais. Over the course of the 1950s, state governments across Brazil reached out to AIA for assistance in forming rural credit and assistance programs in their own states. By 1960, organizations modeled on ACAR had been launched in the states of Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Bahia, Rio Grande do Sul, Espírito Santo, Santa Catarina, Rio de Janeiro, Goiás, and Paraná.¹⁹ With the support of President Kubitschek, a national organization—the Associação Brasileira de Crédito e Assistência Rural (Brazilian Rural Credit and Assistance Association, ABCAR)—was formed in 1956 to coordinate between and support the various state rural credit and assistance associations.

AIA's relationship to ABCAR and the associations based in states outside Minas Gerais was qualitatively different than its involvement in ACAR. In most instances, AIA's support for these organizations took the form of lending experts from the AIA and ACAR to ABCAR or the individual state organizations to provide guidance in setting up their initial operations, or as occasional resources on technical matters. The AIA continued to reserve most of its direct financial assistance to ACAR. Brazilian state and federal governments provided most of the funds for the other association's budgets, and state and national development banks provided financing for their rural credit programs.

Available evidence from ABCAR reports and pamphlets suggests that the national association continued to promote home economics as an important element of its rural assistance programs. Like ACAR, ABCAR recruited female home economists to provide instruction to rural families. Like ACAR, ABCAR promoted housewifery as a way for women to contribute to national progress while fulfilling traditional gender roles. An undated ABCAR brochure used to recruit home economists indicated that home economists would help women develop expertise in nutrition, food preparation, first aid, hygiene, livestock raising, and domestic budgeting. The brochure maintained that this training would prepare women “for

the function of wife and mother,” and that good household management contributed to “happiness of the home,” “intimate satisfaction,” and “the development of the country.”²⁰ Like ACAR, ABCAR outlined a role for women to participate in the modernization of the Brazilian nation, but in traditionally prescribed roles within the nuclear family.

Over the years, the AIA gradually ceded control over ACAR to Brazilian staff as the government of Minas Gerais gradually increased its relative contribution to the association. By 1961, the AIA had completed its final financial contributions to ACAR and handed full control over to the State of Minas Gerais. ACAR continued in operation to at least 1970, the most recent year for which Nelson Rockefeller retained reports from ACAR.²¹

Conclusion

The AIA’s initiatives in Brazil have provided fertile ground for scholars interested in examining North-South transnational exchanges around agriculture and economic development, but the AIA’s interest in promoting home economics is also worth consideration. The AIA’s activities in Brazil provide an example of collaboration between a North American non-governmental organization and Brazilian national and state governments to spread modern practices in home economics, along with contemporary ideas about gender roles within the nuclear family, to rural Brazil. AIA-affiliated organizations linked rural women’s labors at home to a broader effort to raise their communities’ standards of living. They also valorized effective household management as a way for women to contribute to national development. On the one hand, the gender roles outlined by ACAR and ABCAR’s home economists in their demonstrations circumscribed women’s economic activity and agency to their roles within the home and nuclear families. On the other, these women home economists, through their own journeys from one rural community to another, also modeled an active role for women to

participate in national development, and one that likely did not fit neatly into traditional Brazilian gender norms that frowned on women's labor outside the home.

¹ Claiton Marcio da Silva, "Nelson Rockefeller e a atuação da American International Association for Economic and Social Development: debates sobre missão e imperialismo no Brasil, 1946-1961," *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos*, Vol. 20, no. 4 (October, 2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0104-597020130005000014>.

² [1] Susan Besse, *Restructuring Patriarchy: The Modernization of Gender Inequality in Brazil, 1914-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[2] Barbara Weinstein, *For Social Peace in Brazil: Industrialists and the Remaking of the Working Class in São Paulo, 1920-1964* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

³ Berent Friele, Kenneth Kadow, and Dee Jacson, "Home Demonstration Service," American International Association, 1947, p.1, Folder 135, Box 13, Series 1: General, FA079, American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ana Maria da Costa Evangelista, "O Serviço de Alimentação da Previdência Social: Trabalhadores e políticas públicas de alimentação (1940-1967)," XIV Encontro Regional da ANPUH-RIO, 2010. [http://www.encontro2010.rj.anpuh.org/resources/anais/8/1277294268_ARQUIVO_ResumoetextoANPUH2010OServicodeAlimentacaodaPrevidenciaSocial_SalvoAutomaticamente .pdf](http://www.encontro2010.rj.anpuh.org/resources/anais/8/1277294268_ARQUIVO_ResumoetextoANPUH2010OServicodeAlimentacaodaPrevidenciaSocial_SalvoAutomaticamente.pdf)

⁶ Friele et al., "Home Demonstration Service," op. cit., p.2-3.

⁷ Ibid., p. 2

⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

⁹ "American International Association for Economic and Social Development, Annual Report, 1948," p. III.1, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 1: General, FA079, American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁰ "American International Association for Economic and Social Development, Annual Report, 1949," p. 27-28, Folder 2, Box 1, Series 1: General, FA079, American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Segundo Relatório Anual da ACAR, 1950," Associação de Crédito e Assistência Rural, p.2, Folder 325, Box 45, Series 3: Publications and Miscellaneous, FA079, American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹³ Ibid., p.4.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 4-5.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 11-12.

¹⁷ “ACAR: Dez Anos a Serviço do Povo Rural de Minas Gerais, 1949-1959,” Associação de Crédito e Assistência Rural, p.2, Folder 326, Box 45, Series 3: Publications and Miscellaneous, FAO79, American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁸ “Economia Doméstica: Arte e Ciência de Bem Dirigir e Orientar o Lar,” Associação de Crédito e Assistência Rural, undated, Folder 329, Box 45, Series 3: Publications and Miscellaneous, FAO79, American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

¹⁹ “The Brazilian Cooperative Rural Extension System,” Associação Brasileira de Crédito e Assistência Rural, 1960, p.3, Folder 324, Box 45, Series 3: Publications and Miscellaneous, FAO79, American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

²⁰ “Uma Carreira de Futuro: Economia Doméstica,” Associação Brasileira de Crédito e Assistência Rural, Folder 323, Box 44, Series 3: Publications and Miscellaneous, FAO79, American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

²¹ Folder 285, Box 29, Series B, FA339, Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers, AIA-IBEC, Rockefeller Archive Center.