Machisma

How a mix of female empowerment and steamy soap operas helped bring down Brazil’s fertility rate and stoke its vibrant economy.



**National Geographic By Cynthia Gorney**

**José Alberto, Murilo, Geraldo, Angela, Paulo, Edwiges, Vicente, Rita, Lucia, Marcelino, Teresinha.** That makes 11, right? Not including the stillbirth, the three miscarriages, and the baby who lived not quite one full day. Dona Maria Ribeiro de Carvalho, a gravelly-voiced Brazilian lady in her 88th year, completed the accounting of her 16 pregnancies and regarded José Alberto, her oldest son, who had come for a Sunday visit and was smoking a cigarette on her couch. "With the number of children I had," Dona Maria said mildly, her voice conveying only the faintest reproach, "I should have more than a hundred grandchildren right now."

José Alberto, who had been fishing all morning at the pond on his ranch, was still in his sweatpants. His mother's front room in the mid-Brazil town of São Vicente de Minas was just big enough to contain three crowded-in armchairs, a television, numerous family photos, framed drawings of Jesus and the Blessed Virgin, and the black vinyl couch upon which he, Professor Carvalho, retiring head of his university's School of Economics and one of the most eminent Brazilian demographers of the past half century, now reclined. He put his feet up and smiled. He knew the total number of grandchildren, of course: 26. For much of his working life, he had been charting and probing and writing about the remarkable Brazilian demographic phenomenon that was replicated in miniature amid his own family, who within two generations had crashed their fertility rate to 2.36 children per family, heading right down toward the national average of 1.9.

That new Brazilian fertility rate is below the level at which a population replaces itself. It is lower than the two-children-per-woman fertility rate in the United States. In the largest nation in Latin America—a 191-million-person country where the Roman Catholic Church dominates, abortion is illegal (except in rare cases), and no official government policy has ever promoted birth control—family size has dropped so sharply and so insistently over the past five decades that the fertility rate graph looks like a playground slide.

And it's not simply wealthy and professional women who have stopped bearing multiple children in Brazil. There's a common perception that the countryside and favelas, as Brazilians call urban slums, are still crowded with women having one baby after another—but it isn't true. At the demographic center Carvalho helped found, located four hours away in the city of Belo Horizonte, researchers have tracked the decline across every class and region of Brazil. Over some weeks of talking to Brazilian women recently, I met schoolteachers, trash sorters, architects, newspaper reporters, shop clerks, cleaning ladies, professional athletes, high school girls, and women who had spent their adolescence homeless; almost every one of them said a modern Brazilian family should include two children, ideally a *casal,* or couple, one boy and one girl. Three was barely plausible. One might well be enough. In a working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte, an unmarried 18-year-old affectionately watched her toddler son one evening as he roared his toy truck toward us; she loved him very much, the young woman said, but she was finished with childbearing. The expression she used was one I'd heard from Brazilian women before: *"A fábrica está fechada."* The factory is closed.

For demographers working to understand the causes and implications of this startling trend, what's happened in Brazil since the 1960s provides one of the most compelling case studies on the planet. Brazil spans a vast landmass, with enormous regional differences in geography, race, and culture, yet its population data are by tradition particularly thorough and reliable. Pieces of the Brazilian experience have been mirrored in scores of other countries, including those in which most of the population is Roman Catholic—but no other nation in the world seems to have managed it quite like this.

"What took 120 years in England took 40 years here," Carvalho told me one day. "Something *happened."* At that moment he was talking about what happened in São Vicente de Minas, the town of his childhood, where nobody under 45 has a soccer-team-size roster of siblings anymore. But he might as well have been describing the entire female population of Brazil. For although there are many reasons Brazil's fertility rate has dropped so far and so fast, central to them all are tough, resilient women who set out a few decades back, without encouragement from the government and over the pronouncements of their bishops, to start shutting down the factories any way they could.

Encountering women under 35 who've already had sterilization surgery is an everyday occurrence in Brazil, and they seem to have no compunctions about discussing it. "I was 18 when the first baby was born—wanted to stop there, but the second came by accident, and I am *done,"* a 28-year-old crafts shop worker told me in the northeastern city of Recife, as she was showing me how to dance the regional two-step called the *forró.* She was 26 when she had her tubal ligation, and when I asked why she'd chosen irreversible contraception at such a young age—she's married, what if she and her husband change their minds?—she reminded me of son number two, the accident. Birth control pills made her fat and sick, she said. And in case I'd missed this part: She was done.

So why two? Why not four? Why not the eight your grandmother had? Always the same answer—"Impossible! Too expensive! Too much work!" With the facial expression, the widened eyes and the startled grin that I came to know well: It's the 21st century, *senhora,* are you nuts?

Population scholars like José Alberto Carvalho maintain a lively argument about the multiple components of Brazil's fertility plunge. ("Don't let anybody tell you they know for sure what caused the decline," a demographer advised me at Cedeplar, the university-based study center in Belo Horizonte. "We'll never have a winner as the best explanation.") But if one were to try composing a formula for crashing a developing nation's fertility rate without official intervention from the government—no China-style one-child policy, no India-style effort to force sterilization upon the populace—here's a six-point plan, tweaked for the peculiarities of modern Brazil:

1. Industrialize dramatically, urgently, and late, causing your nation to hurtle through in 25 years what economists used to think of as a century's worth of internal rural-to-urban relocation of its citizens. Brazil's military rulers, who seized power in a 1964 military coup and held on through two decades of sometimes brutal authoritarian rule, forced the country into a new kind of economy, one that has concentrated work in the cities, where the housing is cramped, the favela streets are dangerous, babies look more like new expense burdens than like future useful farmhands, and the jobs women must take for their families' survival require leaving home for ten hours at a stretch.

2. Keep your medications mostly unregulated and your pharmacy system over-the-counter, so that when birth control pills hit the world in the early 1960s, women of all classes can get their hands on them, even without a doctor's prescription, if they can just come up with the money. Nurture in these women a particularly dismissive attitude toward the Catholic Church's position on artificial contraception. (See number 4.)

3. Improve your infant and child mortality statistics until families no longer feel compelled to have extra, just-in-case babies on the supposition that a few will die young. Compound that reassurance with a national pension program, relieving working-class parents of the conviction that a big family will be their only support when they grow old.

4. Distort your public health system's financial incentives for a generation or two, so that doctors learn they can count on higher pay and more predictable work schedules when they perform cesareans rather than waiting for natural deliveries. Then spread the word, woman to woman, that a public health doctor who has already begun the surgery for a cesarean can probably be persuaded to throw in a discreet tubal ligation, thus ensuring a thriving, decades-long publicly supported gray market for this permanent method of contraception. Brazil's health system didn't formally recognize voluntary female sterilization until 1997. But the first time I ever heard the phrase "a fábrica está fechada," it was from a 69-year-old retired schoolteacher who had her tubes tied in 1972, after her third child was born. This woman had three sisters. Every one of them underwent a ligation. Yes, they were all Catholic. Yes, the church hierarchy disapproved. No, none of them much cared; they were women of faith, but in some matters the male clergy is perhaps not wholly equipped to discern the true will of God. The lady was pouring tea into china cups at her dining table as we talked, and her voice was matter-of-fact. "Everyone was doing it," she said.

5. Introduce electricity and television at the same time in much of the nation's interior, a double disruption of traditional family living patterns, and then flood the airwaves with a singular, vivid, aspirational image of the modern Brazilian family: affluent, light skinned, and small. Scholars have tracked the apparent family-size-shrinking influence of *novelas,* Brazil's Portuguese-language iterations of the beloved evening soap operas, or *telenovelas,* that broadcast all over Latin America, each playing for months, like an endless series of bodice-ripper paperbacks. One study observes that the spread of televisions outpaced access to education, which has greatly improved in Brazil, but at a slower pace. By the 1980s and '90s all of Brazil was dominated by the Globo network, whose prime-time novelas were often a central topic of conversation; even now, in the era of multichannel satellite broadcasting, you can see café TVs turned to the biggest Globo novela of the season.

While I was there it was *Passione,* featuring the racked-by-secrets industrialist Gouveia family, who were all very good-looking and loaded up with desirable possessions: motorcycles, chandeliers, racing bicycles, airplane tickets, French high-heeled shoes. The widow Gou​veia, resolute and admirable, had three kids. Well, four, but one was a secret because he was born out of wedlock and had been shipped off to Italy in infancy because … uh, never mind. The point is that there were not many Gouveias, nor were there big families anywhere else in the unfathomably complicated plotline.

"We asked them once: 'Is the Globo network trying to introduce family planning on purpose?'" says Elza Berquó, a veteran Brazilian demographer who helped study the novelas' effects. "You know what they answered? 'No. It's because it's much easier to write the novelas about small families.'"

And, finally, number 6: Make all your women Brazilians.

This is volatile territory, Brazil and women. Machismo means the same thing in the Portuguese of Brazil as it does in the rest of the continent's Spanish, and it has been linked to the country's high levels of domestic violence and other physical assaults on women. But the nation was profoundly altered by the *movimento das mulheres,* the women's movement of the 1970s and '80s, and no American today is in a position to call Brazil retrograde on matters of gender equity. When President Dilma Rousseff was running for office last year, the fiercest national debates were about her political ideas and affiliations, not whether the nation was ready for its first female president. One of Rousseff's strongest competitors, in fact—a likely contender in future elections—was a female senator.

Brazil has high-ranking female military officers, special police stations run by and for women, and the world's most famous female soccer player (the one-name-only dazzling ball handler Marta). When I spent an evening in the city of Campinas with Aníbal Faúndes, a Chilean obstetrics professor who immigrated decades ago to Brazil and has helped lead national studies of reproductive health, Faúndes returned again and again to what he regards as the primary force pushing fertility change in his adopted country. "The fertility rate dropped because women decided they didn't want more children," he said. "Brazilian women are tremendously strong. It was just a matter of them deciding, and then having the means to achieve it.”