

In the Din of a Public Housing Project, Stresses of Life Unfold

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SAO PAULO For one hour, about 35 women in one of this city's poorest neighborhoods participated in an experiment: a group therapy session designed to help relieve their collective emotional burden.

It was 2:30 on a recent weekday afternoon in Brasilandia, a massive conglomeration of slums and low-income housing units on [Sao Paulo's](#) north side. It's not the kind of place that instills a lot of pride among its 250,000 residents. According to some of the women who showed up for the session, it's the kind of place that keeps them from filling out address blanks on job applications, afraid that prospective employers might discriminate against them based on where they live.

"We'll begin now," said Claudia Macedo, the psychologist conducting the session, who sat in one of the plastic chairs arranged in a rough circle. "This is an open space, where anyone can come and go as they wish, and where you can share anything -- concerns, fears, and all the things that are making you feel crazy or preventing you from sleeping well."

Some of the women sat on the edges of their chairs, straining to hear Macedo above the other noises competing for attention in the unfinished lobby of a public housing complex. Car engines revved in the parking lot beyond the screened open windows. About 20 children -- most of them the sons and daughters of the women in the group -- were playing in a corner of the room; occasionally one would run through the middle of the therapy circle. To keep them settled, someone carried a television set and DVD player into the corner, plugged them in and turned them on.

The women, meanwhile, introduced themselves above the sound of an animated movie, telling the others why they had requested the session from a nonprofit organization that provides social services in the community.

"I'm looking for harmony."

"I'm looking for peace."

"I'm looking for joy."

Macedo began the session not knowing where the conversations would lead, and encouraged the women to try to be emotionally open. She asked how many of them had a problem they wanted to share with the group, and several raised their hands.

"As we are talking," Macedo told them, "if the tension in the room rises, we will take a break and sing a song together."

Many of the women are first-generation city dwellers, having moved to the outskirts of [South America's](#) largest metropolis hoping for an escape from the abject poverty of [Brazil's](#) rural northeast.

A woman named Lucia described how she had lost her job when the company she worked for went bankrupt. A woman named Josefa said simply, "My body aches." A woman named Noeme said she suffers from memory problems: "Sometimes I walk around and I can't remember where my house is, and I can't sleep at night." [Selma](#), who was keeping one eye on her 4-year-old daughter playing in the corner, said she worried herself sick about the child, who had a severe birth defect.

One after another, daily troubles unspooled, and every one of them made it clear to Macedo that this session would require no digging into psyches to excavate long-buried burdens. All of the problems were on the surface, seemingly inescapable and difficult to resolve.

About halfway through the hour, Macedo told the women to vote on the problem that intrigued them the most, the one that they would most like to discuss in more detail. They voted for Selma's problem. As Selma began to explain her daughter's birth defect, the little girl ran up to her to insist that she look at a picture she had just drawn on a piece of construction paper.

"She looks completely normal," Selma said of the child, adding that actually the girl has spent most of her life battling a rare, critical ailment: When she was born, weighing less than two pounds, some of her internal organs developed on the outside of her body. The doctors told Selma they had read about the condition in books, but had never before seen it.

The bladder that the doctors reconstructed for the child hasn't grown along with the rest of her body. The girl still needs to wear diapers, but baby diapers are too small, and adult ones too big. Other kids sometimes make fun of her, and it tears Selma apart to watch it.

"Before, I used to show everyone before-and-after pictures of her to show them how far she had come," Selma said, as one of the other women passed her tissues to dab the tears that were starting to flow. "Now I have realized that I don't have to keep telling people about my daughter's problem. She's getting older. I keep telling myself not everyone needs to know."

It was 3:20, already nearing the end of the session, and the simple explanation of Selma's problem had several other women wiping their own tears. Macedo pointed out to the women that many of their problems, though individual to their own lives, were actually very similar. Prejudice is all around, she told them, and it's important to recognize the common threads running through all of their lives and talk about them.

She suggested that they all stand up and hold hands. The group formed a circle around Selma and several of the other women who had also spoken about their problems, and they began to sing a song that one of the women suggested, a church hymn.

Before the women broke the circle and returned to their homes, they agreed that the experiment was a success. They said they would continue to meet every two weeks, because one hour simply wasn't enough.