

# Women of Brazil:



## Taking Charge of Their Destiny

by Sharon Hadary, PhD

I looked out over a sea of women entrepreneurs and business leaders. In front of me on the small monitor I could see my slides in English, but behind me they were projected in Portuguese for the audience. I was in Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state in Brazil, to talk about success strategies for women leaders.

I had done my research and was impressed. Brazilian women are a rich economic resource, well-educated, and ambitious. Increasingly they are playing a leading role in business—both as entrepreneurs and as corporate leaders. And business leaders are taking note.

The program was being presented by Instituto Evaldo Lodi (IEL). IEL is part of

the Federation of Industries in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (FIERGS), which helps to facilitate knowledge transfer between universities and business. IEL's mission is to promote corporate and entrepreneurial leadership, innovation, talent development, and competitiveness.

"IEL recognizes that women in entrepreneurial and corporate leadership are the wave of the future. Our goal is to prepare corporations to benefit from this change in the labor force, to support women's entrepreneurship, and to give women the knowledge and inspiration to overcome the challenges and barriers to achieve their goals," says Sabine Bencke who is responsible for international programs for executive education and was my primary contact at IEL.

I was to lead two programs—a half day symposium on women's leadership and a full day workshop on women and men creating an integrated leadership model for their companies. Little did I know that offering programming specifically for women was a new initiative, and the staff who had advocated for the programs were apprehensive.

As *Enterprising Women* readers know, regardless of national boundaries, women leaders have much in common. The staff had nothing to fear. The participants wanted to learn how they could be the most effective leaders, and they wanted to discuss how they could make a difference for other women. There were lively discussions about barriers and opportunities, and we learned from each other.

We all love to hear from highly successful women and this audience was no different. As part of the symposium we had a panel of three prominent women entrepreneurs. Here too I saw many similarities with the challenges we hear from our *Enterprising Women* leaders.

The panelists, Maristella Longhi, Sonia Regina Hess De Souza, and Camila Farani (see their photos with their titles), had all taken over the leadership of family businesses and had led their companies to new levels of success by expanding markets, refining products and services, and strengthening leadership. All three had overcome reluctance on the part of their boards to change and expand; and all had successfully gained credibility in male dominated industries. Similar to the *Enterprising Women* leaders we honor every year, they are active in their industry associations, give back to the community, and want to leave the world a better place. Most of all, they affirmed to every woman in the room that women can achieve their highest aspirations.

Afterwards as we gathered for photos, it was clear they thought the events



**MARISTELLA LONGHI**

CEO of family owned chair of furniture stores; first woman president, MOVERGS, state-wide association of furniture industries; first woman vice president of FIERGS.



**CAMILA FARANI**

CEO of chain of cafes featuring healthy eating; former executive director of Mundo Verde, retailer of natural products; member of Gave Angels, first Brazilian angel investment fund.



**SONIA REGINA HESS DE SOUZA**

Former president of the family business, Dudalina; Member of several boards; owner of multiple clothing trademarks.

## Women in Brazil Well Prepared to Lead

**51%**  
of total population

**30%**  
earned degrees in  
engineering, manufacturing,  
and construction

**86%**  
of women college grads say  
they are “very ambitious”

**44%**  
of workforce

Starting businesses at  
**twice**  
the rate of men

**21%**  
growth in number of  
women-owned businesses  
over the last decade

had made an impact and that having the opportunity to focus specifically on women as leaders was important.

Maristella Longhi said, “For us, the Brazilian women, it was very important to confirm that our way of managing is relevant and achieves high results. Certainly it is very different from the male pattern that has been adopted commonly. We definitely will go far in this path of victories.”

Sonia Regina Hess De Souza agreed. “We are more than 50% of the population and mothers of the other 50% so our mission is to educate our children to make the world a better place to live and work. That is why it is very important for us to be protagonists for change.

Camila Farani remembers being the only woman in the room for many years. “I began to notice the difficulty faced by other women and the insecurities they felt in their jobs. When we encourage women business leadership programs, we offer the connections with other women to facilitate

communication and to understand the universe of women in business.”

Camila hopes someday to conduct the kind of research on women business owners and their enterprises that we have in the United States.

Thaise Graziadio, IEL Operations Manager, summed up what everyone was thinking. “Both events confirmed the issues we discussed are the key for a new era of organizational leadership. It showed us how important it is to offer space for discussion. Next we intend to

bring men to be part of the group.” ©

SHARON HADARY, PhD, is the co-author with Laura Henderson of *How Women Lead: The 8 Essential Strategies Successful Women Know*. Sharon is the former and founding executive director of the Center for Women’s Business Research, blogs for *The Wall Street Journal* Small Business Forum, and is a member of the Enterprising Women Advisory Board. She has been inducted into the Enterprising Women Hall of Fame and has been the recipient of EW’s Legacy Award.

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