

Brazil, where oil and women mix powerfully

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Gilvan Barreto for The New York Times. Maria das Graças Foster, Petrobras chief, with a portrait of Dilma Rousseff, Brazil's president, nearby.

The global oil industry has long been a male-dominated bastion, represented in the popular imagination by real gulf sheiks and fictional swaggerers like J. R. Ewing in "Dallas." But an exception to this rule has emerged in Brazil, Latin America's rising oil power, where women now occupy the most powerful positions in the nation's booming energy industry.

In a matter of weeks this year, Maria das Graças Foster, a longtime chemical engineer, rose to the top job at Petrobras, Brazil's state-controlled oil company, and Magda Chambriard was nominated to lead the National Petroleum Agency, which regulates Brazil's oil sector.

Placing women in such commanding positions is a priority of President Dilma Rousseff, the first woman to lead Brazil. Ms. Rousseff, who visited the United States this week, is a former energy minister who headed Petrobras's board for seven years during the administration of her predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

"She knows the industry very well, and can be extremely demanding," Ms. Foster said in an interview here of Ms. Rousseff, an economist about whom tales of browbeating of subordinates are legend, giving Brazilian comedians ample material for skits. "When she calls, I need to have the answer on the tip of my tongue," Ms. Foster said.

There aren't many examples of women rising high in the energy industry. Within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, Diezani Alison-Madueke, the oil minister of Nigeria, is a woman. In the United States, Lynn Elsenhans was Sunoco's chief executive for four years before stepping down this year. The chief executive of Pertamina, Malaysia's oil company, and the head of Schlumberger Asia, a branch of the oil-field services company, are also women.

But running Petrobras, charged with exploiting vast new oil discoveries deep offshore, is another matter. The company, created 58 years ago and led in its early years by Walter Link, an American oilman, is investing by some estimates more in inflation-adjusted terms than NASA did in the 1960s to put a man on the moon, to produce oil from reserves found under miles of water, rock, sand and salt.

"The program that Petrobras is launching is both critical for Brazil and the global market," said Daniel Yergin, author of "The Quest," a new book about the international energy industry. "She sees the big picture and, at the same time, pays close attention to the details," he said of its new head. "She will quickly become known as one of the most important people in the world oil industry, and certainly the most important and influential woman in the business worldwide."

If Petrobras is able to meet its own ambitious production goals by the 2020s, Brazil could catapult past Latin America's oil powerhouses, Mexico and Venezuela, into the top ranks of global producers. Ventures with Petrobras are already making Rio's economy sizzle, with droves of foreign oilmen driving up rents in exclusive seaside districts like Ipanema and Leblon.

Ms. Foster, on the other hand, still lives in an apartment in Copacabana, a less lustrous area hemmed in by big apartment blocks and hillside favelas, or slums. She stands out as an anomaly in the oil patch, not just as the mother of two adult children but because she chooses not even to own a car. Taxi drivers in Copacabana often call out to her with a cheer, "the lady with the fuel," trying to get her business.

She was born 58 years ago, about the time Petrobras was conceived to reduce Brazil's dependence on foreign oil. In the 1950s, her parents moved from the interior of the neighboring state of Minas Gerais to Rio, where they lived in Morro do Adeus, a poor hillside area that now is part of Complexo do Alemão, a collection of favelas occupied by Brazilian security forces.

As an 8-year-old, she contributed to her family's meager income by working as a trash recycler, collecting discarded cans and paper. She said she had also earned money by writing and reading letters for her neighbors, a family of immigrants from Portugal.

After attending public schools here, she became an intern at Petrobras while studying chemical engineering at the Federal Fluminense University. Then she was lured away into postgraduate studies in nuclear engineering, at a time when Brazil was developing its nuclear energy capacity. But she balked at the prospect of spending five years in Germany to delve further into the field, so she returned to Petrobras. Once back at the company, she never left, rising through a series of management posts and obtaining an M.B.A. at Fundação Getúlio Vargas, an elite Brazilian university.

In 1998, while working for a Petrobras unit involved in a pipeline to import natural gas from Bolivia, she met Ms. Rousseff, then an obscure energy official in Rio Grande do Sul, a southern Brazilian state. Ms. Foster, a supporter of the leftist Workers Party, which has been in power in Brazil since 2002, saw eye-to-eye ideologically with Ms. Rousseff, a Marxist guerrilla in her youth; they both are now committed to welcoming foreign investment in Brazil's oil industry and exposing Petrobras to market forces.

When the former president, Mr. da Silva, appointed Ms. Rousseff to his cabinet as Brazil's energy minister, she named Ms. Foster as one of her top aides in Brasília, the capital. After serving in that position for two years, she chose to return to more hands-on responsibilities at Petrobras. "My business," she said, "is oil and gas."

Shares in Petrobras jumped nearly 4 percent on the day in January she was named as chief executive, replacing the economist José Sergio Gabrielli. But important challenges await her.

Already, she is facing the scrutiny of Brazil's media, arguably Latin America's most aggressive in questioning the power structures at large companies like Petrobras. The newspaper Folha de São Paulo reported in 2010 that a company controlled by Ms. Foster's husband, Colin Foster, a Briton who has long lived in Brazil, had won numerous contracts since 2007 worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to supply Petrobras with electronic equipment.

Petrobras has denied any wrongdoing, contending that none of the acquisitions was carried out by the unit, gas and energy, under Ms. Foster's command.

In addition, a company spokeswoman said in a written reply to questions about these contracts that Petrobras had made only "small purchases" from 2005 to 2010 from Mr. Foster's company.

The company's shares have slumped more than 30 percent over the last year as concerns persist about a range of issues, from delays in procuring ships from Brazilian shipyards for Petrobras's offshore operations to the costs associated with selling gasoline domestically at relatively low prices and importing refined products from abroad.

The most pressing challenge of all at Petrobras, perhaps, may be in meeting expectations of raising output to an estimated 4.5 million barrels a day, from 2.3 million. Doing so will require guiding Petrobras, Latin America's largest company, past equipment bottlenecks, the development of complex new drilling technologies and concerns over spills at offshore fields.

"We're working to get there," Ms. Foster said about meeting Petrobras's output goals.

Naming Ms. Foster to lead Petrobras is just one example of Ms. Rousseff's push to place women in the highest levels of government since taking office last year. Her 38-member cabinet includes 10 women in ministerial posts, including her chief of staff, Gleisi Hoffmann, and Ideli Salvatti, who manages the administration's delicate relations with a Congress of uncertain loyalties.

While Ms. Rousseff maintains a high approval rating of more than 70 percent, reactions to her nominations have been mixed. Evangelical Christian leaders recently lashed out at Eleonora Menicucci, the minister for women's affairs, over her support of abortion in cases of rape or in which a woman's health is at risk. And in 2011, the defense minister, Nelson Jobim, questioned Ms. Salvatti, the minister of institutional relations, calling her "very weak" in published remarks. Ms. Rousseff responded by quickly removing Mr. Jobim from his post, replacing him with Celso Amorim, a former minister of foreign affairs.

Ms. Foster said she was well aware of the challenges awaiting her as a woman leading an oil company with 82,100 employees in a male-dominated industry. She said she welcomed a certain degree of confrontation, even if it took place in the executive suite.

"The best people to work with me are those who interrupt me, even question me," she said. "If I'm speaking loudly, speak louder. When you discuss, you have an environment that's more intense, that's actually warmer, where you arrive at the best solutions for the company."

Fonte: The New York Times, New York, 10 Apr. 2012, International, On-line.