

# WOMEN IN BRAZIL

CAIPORA WOMEN'S GROUP

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# Introduction

Salete dos Santos Gonçalves, 39 years old, is hoping that finally, after a four-year struggle, she and her family will gain a plot of land to farm in their home state of Rio Grande do Sul. At the moment, they and another 518 families are living precariously in a temporary camp, called *Não-Me-Toque* (Don't Touch Me), illegally situated on government land. Though untrained, Salete is providing the families with elementary medical care, while one of her daughters, 16-year-old Evanir, is teaching the children in the camp to read and write.

For years Salete and her husband, Sebastião, were rural workers, employed on a daily basis to harvest crops in the big farms. 'It was too much', says Salete. 'We didn't have a fair wage or a doctor for our children. There was only work for a few months of the year. We lived hopping from branch to branch'. In 1989, Salete's life changed. 'Along with 56 other families, we joined the Movement for Landless Families', comments Salete. 'Since then, we have taken part in five land invasions, all of which ended badly. We were evicted, often violently, by the police.'

In April 1993, Salete and her family took part in a Movement for Landless Families (MST) campaign involving a two-day march to the state capital, Porto Alegre. Four supporters then went on a hunger strike. After a large demonstration, the federal government finally agreed to expropriate land to settle the families living in camps. 'If God wills, we'll get a plot of land where we can all build our own homes and collectively cultivate our crops', says Salete.

Maria da Gloria Teixeira, 50 years old, lives with seven of her 18 children in a one-room shack in the shanty-town of Rio das Pedras in Jacarepagua in Rio de Janeiro. Four of her children have died. Another, 9-year-old Armindo, suffers from cerebral palsy and lies all day in a cot. The other six, from 5 to 16 years old, do all kinds

of odd jobs. Together, they earn US\$20-30 a month. The family survives by collecting scraps of food on rubbish tips.

A makeshift pipe brings water into Maria da Gloria's hut. The sewer is an open channel in front of the house. 'When it rains, the sewer floods and sewage gets into my water', she says. If the rains are heavy, sewage can even flood over the floor of her hut. 'Just last week', she says, 'two of my children were bitten by rats.' None of the children has been vaccinated.

Maria da Gloria and her family are some of the 40 million Brazilians estimated by the government to be living in absolute poverty. Her shack is just quarter of an hour's walk away from the luxury apartment block of Barra da Tijuca, where Brazil's rich elite enjoys one of the most glamorous life styles in the world.

Maria Alice Ferraz is one of the last employees working for Codevale (the Commission for the Development of the Valley of Jequitinhonha), a government agency set up in the 1970s to help develop an impoverished area in the north of the state of Minas Gerais. Maria, who earns US\$60 a month, travels throughout the region buying up pottery. For many of the families, it is their only way of earning money. 'Like many government agencies, Codevale is in a state of collapse', says Maria. 'It has virtually closed down, except for the pottery section, which is self-financing.'

As there is little employment in the region, most of the men spend seven months of the year in the state of São Paulo, working in sugar mills. The women are left to bring up the children in extreme hardship. 'Many end up giving their children cachaça (sugar-cane rum). It is cheaper than milk and it stops them crying all night from hunger. Alcoholism does become a problem, but it's easier for the women to deal with than starvation.'

Maria do Socorro Lira Feitosa, a 32-year-old peasant woman, gathered together about 100 people from her small community in the state of Pernambuco in the drought-ridden Northeast of Brazil. Carrying candles to help them find their way at night, palm leaves to protect them from the morning sun and a little manioc flour to eat, they set out in the middle of the night to walk 24 kilometres to the cross-roads where Luis Inacio 'Lula' da Silva, president of the Workers' Party, was due to pass by the following morning. At the head of a large caravan, organised to alert the country to the problem of hunger, Lula was repeating the journey he had made 41 years earlier as a 7-year-old child, when his mother — along with hundreds of thousands of other Brazilians — had made the long trek down from the impoverished Northeast in search of a new life

in the industrial city of São Paulo.

Holding a microphone, Maria do Socorro, mother of nine children, spoke to the caravan. 'We're not here to be nice', she said. 'We're here because we're starving.' In a few minutes she told the story of her community, a story of hardship, unemployment and hunger. A university lecturer taking part in the caravan was impressed by the power of her language and the force of her logic. 'I very much doubt whether the President of the Republic could have ordered his arguments more effectively', he confessed. The newspapers on the following day called her Mother Courage.

When she ended by stating emphatically: 'We are not returning on foot', everyone knew she meant it. Transport home was arranged, and Lula set up a special commission to help this small community lobby the state and federal government.

Stories like these abound throughout Brazil where thousands of women are fighting for their families and their communities, often in the most difficult conditions. Their fearlessness, tenacity and sheer guts impress all who meet them and prompted the Brazilian and German members of the Caipora women's group to put together this book, originally published in Germany in 1991. Some of the women featured in this book are heads of families, facing the world alone. Many others are the driving force in their families, living with men who, after long periods of unemployment or exhausting work for low pay, have given up the struggle. Perhaps because they lack that stubborn commitment to their children shared by so many women, Brazilian men often do not seem to measure up to the standard set by the women.

The courage shown by the women is all the more remarkable because it takes place against a background of profound inequality, for women face a range of discriminatory practices throughout society.

## Poor and Rich

The most profound inequality faced by most Brazilian women is not specific to their gender. It is simply the discrimination that they suffer from being poor in a society that, to an extraordinary extent, is geared to the interests of the rich.

According to World Bank figures, Brazil is the most unequal society in the world: the richest 20 per cent of the population has an income 27.3 times greater than the poorest 20 per cent of the population. Next in the table comes Botswana, where the ratio is

23.6. In India, it is 5.1 and in Bangladesh, 3.7. Though figures are not available, most economists believe that even within Brazil's richest 20 per cent, income is highly concentrated, with a small elite enjoying one of the most sumptuous living standards in the world.

At the other end of the scale, about 14.4 million families — 65 million people — are considered 'poor', that is, they have a monthly income of half a minimum wage (US\$25) or less. Over half of these — about 34 million — do not earn enough money to feed themselves adequately, even if they were able to use all their income to buy food. These are the so-called 'indigents'.

World Bank figures indicate that the situation has been getting steadily worse for those at the bottom of the heap: while the poorest 2 per cent of the population had 2.6 per cent of the wealth in 1980, their share had dropped to 2.1 per cent by 1990. In Latin America as a whole, the poorest 20 per cent had 4 per cent of the income in 1990.

One of the main reasons for the intensifying concentration of wealth is runaway inflation. Over the last 5 years Brazilian inflation reached 1,825,059,944,842.56 per cent, probably a world record. In 1992 alone it reached 1,150 per cent, second only to Russia. Brazil's inflation soars far ahead of its neighbours: in 1992 the cost-of-living index rose by 17 per cent in Argentina, 13 per cent in Chile, and 9 per cent in Bolivia. Inflation at this level acts as a powerful mechanism for transferring wealth from the poor to the rich, who can use their access to the financial system to hedge against high inflation. They can put their money in inflation-indexed savings accounts. They can open up dollar accounts abroad. They can buy up inflation-proof assets, like gold and property.

None of these tricks is available to the poor who earn the minimum wage, the value of which is only adjusted at three-monthly intervals. Whereas the minimum wage might be worth US\$70-80 immediately after an increase, its value falls to about US\$30-40 by the end of the period. Besides this, the adjustment fixed by the government is never enough to make up in full for the erosive impact of inflation. As a result, the purchasing power of the minimum wage has halved in the last decade.

The decline in living standards of the poor, combined with the grave crisis in the state sector, which for all practical purposes has gone bankrupt, has led to an unprecedented social crisis. About 98 million people, three-quarters of them in urban areas, have no sewers. About 30 million have no running water. Diseases, such as cholera, which the government thought eradicated for ever, have re-emerged. According to the health ministry, the country's public health



system has degenerated into an enormous system of emergency medicine, with doctors and nurses treating diseases that could have been prevented earlier. An estimated 80 per cent of the people visiting casualty, and 6 per cent of the patients admitted to hospital, are suffering from illnesses that would not have arisen if the country had an adequate system of drinking water and sanitation. Other illnesses, such as malaria, that could be controlled with sufficient investment from the government, are spreading. Brazil now has 530,000 cases of malaria a year — twice the level of 1979.

Widespread poverty has also spawned an increasing number of armed robberies and murders in the cities. Though the wealthy complain vociferously about the rise in thefts, murders and kidnappings in well-off areas of the cities, it is the poor who suffer most from urban violence. Death from so-called 'external causes' (largely murder and deaths from traffic accidents) now makes up 17 per cent of deaths, compared with 5 per cent in 1979.

All this means that life is very hard for the poor, whatever their gender, but there is no doubt that women have a rougher deal than men.

## **Women at Work**

Prejudice against women is blatant in the workplace. The number of women working in industry has more than tripled since 1970. Displacing men, they are stepping into low-skilled, low-paying, repetitive jobs clustered in the textiles and electronics industries. Women are also disproportionately represented among temporary, part-time and home-based workers.

Despite the importance of female workers in the industrial labour force, most women find it extremely difficult to have a career structure and to work their way up through the job market. They are employed as unskilled workers and there they are expected to stay. Men are selected before women for skills training and promotion, and their wages reflect this. Research carried out in 1985 showed that in São Paulo, Latin America's most advanced industrial metropolis, the average male income was more than double the average female income, at the same levels of education. The gap between the two — which, surprisingly, was greatest at the highest educational levels — was wider than anywhere else in the Americas.

Women are cheap workers, and employers are keen to keep them this way, despite the clauses in the 1988 Constitution guaranteeing equal pay for comparable work. To keep to a minimum their outlay

on maternity pay and childcare, some employers conduct covert pregnancy tests during 'routine' health check-ups. Others simply demand proof of sterilisation before taking on women workers.

Despite the changes, the number of jobs available in industry for women remains limited, particularly as the Brazilian economy has been going through a decade-long recession. Many female workers, particularly black women and semi-literate women from the countryside, have to resort to the traditional source of employment for poor Brazilian women, domestic service, still responsible for about half of women's jobs. Thanks to a vigorous campaign carried out by the Trade Union of Domestic Workers, more maids are being registered by their employers at the ministry of employment, which means that they are finally gaining access to the limited welfare services available through the social services. But even so, pay is generally low and conditions of work poor.

Some women, particularly in the frontier mining zones and in the cities, cannot get jobs as maids or reject their working conditions. Many of these women turn to an even older trade — prostitution. AIDS has made this a particularly hazardous profession. Originally most prevalent among homosexual and bisexual men, AIDS is now quietly spreading among women and children. By 1993, over 34,000 cases of AIDS had been reported in Brazil, about 12,000 of them in children. Up to a million people are believed to be infected with HIV.

In response, prostitutes are getting organised, particularly in the cities. Simone, a 20-year-old in São Paulo, said that she and many of her colleagues now demand that their clients use condoms. 'Yesterday, a man offered to pay me double, if I had sex without a condom', she recalls. 'I refused.' With support from the state government, Simone and another 60 women, all of whom work in the centre of São Paulo around the Luz railway station, have just published a 15-page booklet, giving basic health information for prostitutes. They are also campaigning for a free supply of condoms. 'We charge 50,000 cruzeiros (about US\$4) to have sex', says Simone. 'On pay day, we each have about six to ten customers, but on other days trade is slack. A pack of three condoms costs about 25,000 cruzeiros (about US\$2). It's a big chunk out of our pay. We need a regular free supply.' In a country without an adequate system of social welfare, some Brazilian women do not have the money to bring up their children adequately. This is undoubtedly the main reason why about seven million youngsters are on the streets, earning money by selling sweets, watching over parked cars and, in a few cases, robbing passers-by. It is not just an urban phenomenon,

hundreds of thousands of kids work in the countryside. One such child-worker is 14-year-old Alessandra Ribeiro, who is picked up by a truck each day at 5 a.m. from her home in Felixlandia in the interior of the state of Minas Gerais. She and 16 other girls, known as the '*meninas-formicidas*' ('the girl ant-killers'), spend all day applying insecticide with their bare hands to kill the ants that infest the eucalyptus plantation. For this, she earns about US\$2 a day.

## Women and Fertility

Many Brazilian women are profoundly distressed by their failure to carry out properly what they see as their basic task — to look after their children properly. Many of them are taking desperate measures to avoid having any more children. Even though it is illegal to terminate a pregnancy, except in a very few restricted circumstances, the World Health Organisation put the number of abortions in Brazil at between three and five million a year. The Brazilian Bar Association (OAB), gives an even higher estimate — about six million.

Though almost all Brazilian women of every class seem to have an abortion at some time or other in their lives, poor women going to public hospitals to be treated for post-abortion complications still face great prejudice. Maria Alice, a 48-year-old black woman, married when she was 14. She became a widow at 22, married again, but separated when she was 34. She then turned to prostitution as the only means of raising her children. As well as having 11 children, she has had 13 miscarriages and four abortions.

She says that all her attempts at abortion were dangerous and extremely unpleasant: 'The first time I wanted an abortion, in 1979, I went to a *curiosa* (a backstreet abortionist). She tried to suck out the foetus with a pump. I went to hospital with heavy bleeding but the doctor threatened to call the police. So I went back to the *curiosa*, who cleaned me out without giving me an anaesthetic. The pain was agonising.'

After such an experience, Maria Alice was unwilling to go back to the *curiosa*. 'When I needed abortions again, in 1983 and 1985, I did it all myself. I used a cabbage stalk, drank abortive teas and took Cytotec (a drug). Both times I suffered terrible pain and bled for over a week. But it worked.' Maria Alice's last abortion, in 1990, was in some ways the worst. 'I tried to do the abortion myself but had to go to hospital. They called me a murderer and left me for

three days on a stretcher in the corridor. When my friends found me, I was beginning to rot inside.'

The drug taken by Maria Alice — Cytotec — is becoming increasingly popular. It was originally brought into Brazil by the drug companies to treat ulcers. One of its side effects, however, is to contract the uterus, provoking an internal haemorrhage. Though it should be sold only under prescription, Cytotec is readily available in Brazilian chemists, as are many other powerful drugs. An article published recently in the British medical magazine, *The Lancet*, gives the result of a research project carried out from 1990 to 1992 in a hospital in Fortaleza in the Northeast of the country. According to the article, 1,916 women were admitted to this hospital during this time to have uterine scrapes; 31 per cent of these women had attempted an abortion, almost three-quarters of them by taking Cytotec.

Many of the same pressures that lead Brazilian women to have abortions are also responsible for the recent rapid increase in female sterilisation. Though the government has never undertaken a national campaign in favour of sterilisation, and the Catholic Church is still opposed to it, about 30 per cent of Brazilian women of child-bearing age, including many in their late teens or early twenties, have been sterilised. It is clear that many young women see it as the lesser of two evils: it is better to be sterilised when you are 20 than to end up with ten children. Though no up-to-date statistics are available, the high level of sterilisation must be leading to a decline in abortion.

The situation worries many Brazilians. 'Our rate of female sterilisation is three times the average in developed countries and higher than in almost every other developing country', comments Senator Carlos Patrocinio, who headed a Congressional enquiry into the issue. Eva Blay, a senator who has done a great deal to increase national awareness about women's issues, points out that about one in eight women later regret the step. But, she says, the women are usually behaving responsibly, given the narrow range of options they face. 'It's largely the fault of the federal government', she says. 'While unwilling to provide a proper family planning service that allows women to make informed choices, it has allowed foreign agencies, largely from the United States, to fund sterilisation programmes. It has also turned a blind eye to the not uncommon practice, documented in the state of Pernambuco and São Paulo, of politicians paying the bills for voters' sterilisation operations in return for their votes.'

Eva Blay is now campaigning to have abortion decriminalised. She also wants the 1988 Constitution respected, as it guarantees women the right to choose between a wide range of contraceptive devices. 'They keep telling me that poor women aren't capable of using contraceptives, like the cap or the pill. That's ridiculous. They can make great cakes, for example, and that's far more complicated. See if most men can do it.'

Apart from sterilisation, the only other method of birth control commonly used in Brazil is the pill, which is freely available at chemists and is the form of contraception favoured by middle-class women. It is estimated that about 20-25 per cent of married women are on the pill.

Taken together, abortion, sterilisation and the pill have revolutionised Brazil's demographic patterns. In the 1940s, Brazilian women had on average 6.2 children. By 1980, the average had fallen to 3.5 children, declining further to 2.5 children in 1990. Even in the backward Northeast, where the Brazilian public still imagines peasant families have 11 or 12 children, the average number of children per woman fell from 5.1 in 1980 to 3.5 in 1990. As a result, Brazil's population growth rate fell from an annual average of 2.4 per cent in the 1970s to 2.2 per cent in the 1980s.

## **The Women's Movement**

The sweeping changes that have occurred to women's lives over the last 40 or 50 years have led women in Brazil, as in many other countries in the world, to demand a greater say over what happens to them. The women's movement emerged as a political force in the 1960s and, as happened with the mass-based movements among landless peasant families and Indian communities, the Catholic Church played an important role. As many priests and lay-workers turned towards the poor and against the military regime, they promoted community organisations, especially among those who had been increasingly excluded by the post-1964 regime. Women were actively encouraged to participate.

The Catholic Church, however, did not on the whole challenge the conventional view of women's role in society. Women were usually encouraged to set up 'mothers' clubs', which were intended to deal with 'women's issues', such as child-rearing, cooking and home-building. With the growth in opposition to the military, these clubs provided the organisational base for several political movements which expanded into city-wide, and even nation-wide,

political campaigns. Mothers in their clubs were the driving force behind the Women's Amnesty Movement, the Cost of Living Movement and the Fight for Creches Movement all of which had considerable political importance in the 1970s and 1980s. Even so, these movements tended not to concern themselves with the overall situation of women in society. Their action centred on demanding community day-centres and better health care services for women and children from the municipal and state governments.

The creation since the mid-1970s of specifically feminist organisations has helped to mobilise women on gender issues. There are today more than 400 feminist groups, most of them set up by middle-class women. Since the opening up of the political system in the early 1980s, these groups have played an active role within the party political system. Women lobbied heavily during the drawing up of the 1988 Constitution, establishing women's rights to four months of maternity leave, equal pay for comparable work, social security for domestic workers and title to property regardless of marital status.

Brazilian women often complain that the pace of change has been agonisingly slow, particularly if compared with the advances made in many of the industrialised countries. But Marta Suplicy, a leading sexologist, is sanguine: 'Brazilian women couldn't vote until 1932. Until 1962 they were treated under Brazilian law as equivalent to children or primitive Indians. They had to ask permission from their fathers or husbands to leave the country or even to drive a car. A lot more needs to be done, but we've come a long way.'

One of the areas where change has been occurring most rapidly is the treatment of women in the home. Domestic violence is a problem that women — and women alone — have to face. Women are still assaulted and killed with virtual impunity in crimes of passion, particularly in the countryside. Because a man's 'honour' traditionally takes precedence over a woman's rights, the so-called 'honour defence' is still successful in 80 per cent of the cases that come to court. At the same time the police almost always fail to press charges against men accused of battering or raping women in the home. All this led Americas Watch to conclude in a report published in 1991 that there was a clear pattern of discrimination against female victims of domestic violence in the Brazilian criminal justice system.

For over 20 years the women's movement has been campaigning against the failure of the Brazilian government to punish those responsible for domestic violence. Finally, in 1984, Brazil ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

**Discrimination Against Women.** Shortly afterwards, it set up 79 specialised police stations to deal exclusively with crimes of violence against women. Then, after a nationwide women's rights campaign, the 1988 Constitution guaranteed the equality of women before the law and established the government's obligation to prevent violence in the home as well as in the public domain.

All this has revolutionised women's attitudes. The number of women registering complaints at the special stations has been rising rapidly. This may reflect, in part, an increase in violence, as living standards deteriorate in the sprawling urban areas around all Brazil's cities. But the rise is also thought to reflect growing determination by women to have their rights respected.

Despite these advances, the legacy of the past lingers. Many police officers, male and female, still fail to regard domestic abuse as a serious crime. Discriminatory attitudes towards female victims persist, even at the special women's stations. Many police staff still consider battering to be a private rather than a criminal offence and urge women not to register their complaints. The police also tend to hold stereotypical attitudes about women's roles, accusing women who are out alone at night of 'neglecting' their husbands and of somehow provoking violence.

## **Black Women**

Most women in Brazil are the victims of double discrimination — for being poor and female. But there is a further large group of women who suffer a third type of discrimination — for being black. Black Brazilians account for about 45 per cent of the population. Year after year studies show that they are victims of glaring racial discrimination. Compared with white Brazilians with the same level of education and with similar work experience, black Brazilians can expect to lose more children to disease, die sooner themselves and earn less. Black Brazilians who have had 12 years of schooling earn less than white Brazilians with eight years of education.

Despite all the evidence, racial discrimination is rarely acknowledged and poorly understood, even by Brazilians themselves. Many talk of Brazil as a 'racial democracy', a concept first devised by the anthropologist, Gilberto Freyre, in the 1930s. According to him, Brazil's long history of racial miscegenation forged a common Brazilian identity that was neither 'black' nor 'white'. With all races freely intermingling, Brazil developed, he claims, a culture of racial cordiality. It was a convenient theory,