

WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN BRAZIL

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Summary

In Brazil, host country of the Earth Summit in 1992, the women and environment perspective started to be more clearly articulated during the Conference's preparatory process. It represented an opportunity to shed light on the work of hundreds of groups that started their mobilization around struggles for a better quality of life for themselves,

their families and their communities. It also represented an opportunity for the feminist health movement to develop a women's perspective in the hot debate of population and environment. Women strongly questioned the notion that poverty was a major cause of environmental degradation, recognizing that this understanding lays the groundwork for the justification of top-down, demographically-driven population policies and programs.

The movement of women and sustainability gained strength in the framework of Local Agenda 21. This was mainly due to the dimensions of Brazil and to the fact that in the last decade there was an increase in women's leadership at the municipal level.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part presents an overview of the situation of women in Brazil through recent statistics and surveys; local environmental initiatives; and a description of change in governmental practices. The second explains how the Brazilian women's movement on sustainability developed, based on the framework provided by the Women's Action Agenda 21. It describes examples of local sustainability initiatives, and identifies some challenges that still remain to be addressed. Finally the article addresses some strategies that could be undertaken, including methods of gathering data to strengthen women's situation and participation in Brazil.

1. Overview of Main Issues affecting Women and Environment in Brazil

1.1. Brazilian Women's Representation in Numbers

Brazil is a large country, ranking fifth in the world in terms of both area and population. Although ranked ninth in Gross National Income (GNI), the question of poverty is one of the most substantial factors for the analysis of sustainability in Brazil. This is seen in the GNI per capita where Brazil ranks 81, in other words the high Brazilian GNI level is not distributed pr. capita. The Brazilian population is 169.9 million (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) Census 2000), of which 50 million people live below the poverty line, and women are more affected by poverty than men. The urban population in Brazil is 80% of the total population and women represent 51.5%. The rural population is 20%, of which 47.7% are women.

When presenting the following statistical material it has to be emphasized that the numbers only represent part of the attempt to understand the complex living situation in Brazil. Indicators of gender, race, level of education, unemployment and health together constitute an understanding of Brazilian women's lives but they have to be seen as a part of a larger national, local and global context.

1.1.1. Education and Employment

While there are some overall general characteristics in Brazil as a country, each region in Brazil has unique conditions that affect development and women's quality of life in that particular region. For example, on average in Brazil, men and women are equally illiterate (Table 1), but in the North and North-east women are less illiterate. In the North-eastern region the illiteracy rate is especially high both for men and women and in the Southern region, the illiteracy rate is lowest. Illiteracy is still a problem in Brazil,

with 13.3% of the population lacking the basic tools from where a stable fundament can be built in terms of quality of life, health, employment and knowledge about themselves and their surroundings.

According to IBGE, 22.8% of all women over the age of 5 were illiterate in 1994, but the percentage of those who had completed 11 years of schooling rose from 35% in 1994 to 43% in 2000. Even though women are better educated than men, generally speaking, the higher the education, the higher the wage difference between men and women of the same occupation (Census 2000). According to a study carried out in six Brazilian cities in December 2000, women in metropolitan areas, although they have the same educational level as men, or higher, earn about 60% of what men earn for occupying the same positions. Also, women workers do not have the same working conditions as men. The proportion of women who work under vulnerable and precarious contracts, or without a contract, is significantly higher than that of men (DIEESE/SEADE 2000).

Brazil and Major Regions	Total %	Male %	Female %
Brazil (1)	13.3	13.3	13.3
North (2)	11.6	11.7	11.5
Northeast	26.6	28.7	24.6
Southeast	7.8	6.8	8.7
South	7.8	7.1	8.4
Central West	10.8	10.5	11.0

Source: IBGE Census 2000.

- (1) Excludes data for the rural area of the states of Rondônia, Acre, Amazonas, Roraima, Pará and Amapá.
- (2) Excludes data from the rural area.

Table 1: Illiteracy rate for the Brazilian population aged 15 and over (1999)

Brazilian women are becoming more active economically (see Table 2). Since 1970 their participation has risen to double but it is still not equal to that of men. Women are still perceived of as the domestic workers at home with no time or access to a paid job. And women's unemployment rate in Brazil is notably higher than that of men (see Table 3). In all regions, Brazilian women are more unemployed than men. In the North and South-east, where the general unemployment rate is 11.7% and 11.2% respectively, women's unemployment is 14-15%.

Year	%
1970	20.4%
1981	32.9%
1991	39.2%
1995	38.0%
1998	40.6%
1999	41.4%

Source: AMB/ Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras, *Políticas Públicas para as*

Mulheres no Brasil – 5 anos após Beijing, Brasília, April 2000

Table 2: Women's participation in the Economically Active Population since 1970

Brazil and Major Regions	Total %	Male %	Female %
Brazil (1)	9.9	8.1	12.3
North (2)	11.7	9.2	15.1
Northeast	8.5	7.2	10.4
Southeast	11.2	9.2	14.1
South	8.1	6.7	10.0
Central West	9.4	7.0	12.8

Source: IBGE Census 2000.

(1) Excludes data for the rural area of the states of Rondônia, Acre, Amazonas, Roraima, Pará and Amapá.

(2) Excludes data from the rural area.

Table 3: Unemployment Rate by Sex (1999) Population aged 15-65

The relationship between gender and head of household is only slowly changing (see Table 4). In 1981 women were in charge of 16.9% of the households and in 1999 this percentage had changed to 26% of Brazilian households (Census 2000). But women need to be respected more in their home sphere. They may be working more outside the home and they may receive better education than the men, but they are still trapped in a traditional understanding of women's role. If they are not able to determine their own destiny because they cannot get a job outside the home, or they cannot survive on the salary even if they are able to work, then they will continue to depend on men and never be able to gain equal rights.

Brazil and Major Regions	Male	Female
Brazil (1)	74.0	26.0
North (2)	70.5	29.5
North-east	73.4	26.6
South-east	77.6	26.7
South	77.6	22.4
Central West	74.4	25.6

Source: IBGE Census 2000.

(1) Excludes data for the rural area of the states of Rondônia, Acre, Amazonas, Roraima, Pará and Amapá.

(2) Excludes data from the rural area.

Table 4: Head of household by Sex (1999)

1.1.2. Reproductive Health

Brazilian women's reproductive health is threatened by the fact that abortion is illegal. Each year, an estimate of 1 400 000 clandestine abortions are carried out in Brazil, and, according to the Allan Guttmacher Institute (1994), 250,000 women are hospitalized

annually due to complications from clandestine abortions (CNDM 1999).

Brazil and major regions	Total per 1000
Brazil	69.4
North	65.1
North-east	105.2
South-east	50.7
South	45,5
Central West	52.2

Source: IBGE/DPE/Departamento de População e Indicadores Sociais.

Table 5: Infant under 5 Mortality Rate (1999)

Childbirth represents the primary cause of hospitalization of women in the public health care system. Among women in the age of 15 to 19, the main reason for hospitalization is pregnancy, delivery and after-delivery problems. In all regions of the country 80.3% of female hospitalizations are due to these reasons (CFEMEA). Similarly, the infant mortality in Brazil is 70 deaths per 1000 children under 5 (Table 6). In the North-east the infant mortality rate is almost 3 times as high as in the south. The mortality rate for women in the North-east is also higher there than in other parts of the country.

There are no national surveys on sexual and domestic violence. However, a general picture of the situation can with some caution be drawn from the number of reported occurrences of violence against women—the number of such cases at one of the 254 police departments (Delegacias Especializadas no Atendimento à Mulher) specialized in women’s issues. In 1999, 327 000 cases were reported. Of these cases, almost 40% of them involved bodily harm (Table 6). The categories used to describe the different cases are not explained and therefore it is not clear if some of the cases overlap in terms of type of assault. Neither is it indicated how many of the cases were due to domestic violence.

Top 5 in Brazil	Total numbers out of 326,793 reported cases	% (the sum does not ad up to 100%)
1. Bodily harm*	120,844	36.98
2. Threats**	107,999	33.05
3. Libel	10,049	3.08
4. Rape	4,697	1.44
5. Rape attempts	1,242	0.38

Source: CNDM (the national council of women’s rights in Brazil)

* Lesão Corporal and Lesão Corporal Culposa

** It is not indicated whether it is physical or psychological

Table 6: Types of reported crime against women in Brazil (1999)

1.1.3 Politics

In 1995 a quota of a minimum of 30% of women participants in political positions was approved in Brazil. However, it is still difficult to rely on statistical data to analyze whether this system of quota has in fact improved women's participation in politics or not, between the elections of 1996 and 2000. The problem is that the statistical data from the 1996 elections is not systematically divided by gender. According to the TSE (the Supreme Electoral Tribunal), in 2000 there were 70 321 women candidates to **city councils** and 296 902 men. The minimal quota of 30% was not achieved; women represented 19.14% of candidates and 11.61% were elected. For the Local mayor positions (Prefeituras Municipais), women represented 7.59% of the candidates and 5.70% were elected. For the Mayor position in Brazilian cities, six women were elected, representing 20.38% of cities. (Source: Jornal FEMEA 2001).

1.2 Women and the Environment: Specific Environmental Issues

Native tropical forests around the world covered approximately 19 million km² in the late 1980s, 26% of which were in Brazil. Out of this total, 396 000 km², or 8%, were protected areas, not including Indian lands which accounted for 11% of the total for the country. Planted forests, mostly of eucalyptus and pines, represented about 102 000 km².

In spite of government efforts, the deforestation of native forests has continued, frequently due to the demand for wood products in association with land clearing for agricultural purposes. The most endangered forest is the Atlantic rainforest which has dwindled to less than 5% of its initial area and is under continuous pressure from human activity along the coastline.

The availability of fresh water, estimated at over 5000 billion m³ per year, is largely concentrated in the Amazon basin with 80% of that total. Signs of scarcity have already appeared in the North-east and South-east, where demand is highest in proportion to supply. Irrigation and other rural uses were estimated at 60% of demand in 1991, with industrial and residential consumption sharing the remaining 40%. Lack of water has a considerable impact on health issues and on the workload of women.

Land tenure also remains a critical issue, for various reasons. One is the abnormal concentration of large farming units in relatively few hands. Limits on the expansion of the agricultural frontier, both urban and rural unemployment caused by layoffs in industry, and increased mechanization in agriculture, all exacerbated land reform expectations in the last decade of the twentieth century. Action by the so-called Landless Farmers Movement has escalated since 1995 and prompted the federal government to set up a Ministry for Agrarian Reform with the responsibility for settling 160 000 families.

There is a growing trend in Brazil among women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local government and scientific representatives, to consider family farming and organic agriculture as essential elements for a complete restructuring of agricultural and cattle-raising activities in order to make them more sustainable. These are all

important steps towards incorporating the gender perspective.

1.3 State Reforms: Change in Governmental Practices in Key Sectors

The Plano Real, launched on July 1994, was a major achievement in terms of public administration, with strong support from Brazilian society. After 30 years of persistently high rates of inflation, which exceeded 1000% in 1993, this was the fourth or fifth attempt carried out to achieve monetary stabilization. Results until 2000 showed a declining annual rate close to a one-digit figure.

Institutional reform following the *Plano Real* was inevitable, pointing to decentralization, privatization, better coordination and a clearer division of responsibility among the three levels of government, improved political, fiscal and public management practices, and a more stable social security system, as highlights of the process. However, much still has to be accomplished.

Gradual improvement in all these sectors is an essential feature to overcome gender disparities and improve the environmental area. The state reforms have facilitated the setting up of decentralized systems and practices in the pursuit of a broader participation of civil society in decision and policy making.

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Biographical Sketch

Thais Corral is a journalist with a master in public policy by the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Her field of work for the last fourteen years has been in the non profit "third sector". She is the founder of three non-profit organizations, two in Brazil—REDEH (Network for Human Development) and CEMINA (Communication, Education, Information on Gender)—and one in the USA, called WEDO (Women Environment and Development Organization) which is one of the biggest international women's organizations working in the area of political advocacy. All these organizations are concerned with women's political and social empowerment, through the use of leadership training, communication tools and advocacy strategies.

Thais was one of the few women that represented civil society and gender concerned issues at the UN Global Conferences that took place in the 1990s. Her main interests are concerned with the challenges posed by women's contributions to improve global and local governance.

Among her accomplishments are the mobilization of women during the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) through the Women's Action Agenda 21 and Planeta FEMEA, a major event organized by women worldwide at the Global NGO Forum. She also was very involved in the design of stakeholders' participation in the Brazilian Agenda 21.

She has received several awards that express acknowledgement of her leadership: the "100 Heroines Award", and the "Award Abril Mulher" for her contribution to the improvement of the status of women in Brazil. She was also recognized as "the Woman of the Year in 2001" by Brazilian National Council of Women.

She is a LEAD (Leadership for Environment and Development) fellow of the third cohort. She is also fluent in Portuguese, English, Spanish, Italian and French.