
Brazil: Discrimination and violence against women in the construction of hydroelectric dams

Cause and effect of a dam
The company staff came
And said nothing would happen
Suddenly a surprise
The parents rose up in protest
The girls made themselves pretty
Because more than 4,000 men came to town
[...]
Some of the girls got caught up
And were showered with promises
They said they had motorcycles and cars
Lots of money
And someday they would get married
But something went wrong
After the adventure, their bellies started growing
And then came the suffering
Children in their arms
And no one to care for them [...]

Rosa Aguiar (In: A vida dos povos atingidos por barragens em poesia (The Life of Dam-Affected People in Poetry). São Paulo: Escola Nacional de Formação Política do MAB, 2010.)

The struggle of communities affected by dams emerged in the 1980s, when Brazil began building hydroelectric dams to produce electricity and meet the energy demands of the country's industrialization. In this context, the struggle of those affected by these projects grew from their need to demand respect for their rights from the Brazilian government and the companies involved.

The Movement of Dam-Affected People (Movimento dos Atingidos pelas Barragens, or MAB) was thus born as a way to provide a forum for the common people, and especially for affected populations. The aim of MAB is to denounce and oppose the current policies of the electric power sector. But struggling to guarantee the rights of the affected populations is not enough. In addition to denouncing the current model of energy production and consumption and fighting against violations of rights, MAB also promotes discussion of the need to develop a new Popular Energy Project, in which the basis for analysis is an understanding of for whom and for what energy is produced.

The current model of hydroelectric dam construction in Brazil "has repeatedly fostered serious violations of human rights, whose consequences ultimately aggravate serious pre-existing social inequalities, translating into situations of extreme poverty and social, family and individual breakdown," according to the Council for the Defence of the Rights of the Human Person (CDDPH).

Women, who already “normally” suffer from gender inequality in Brazilian society, are the ones most affected by the situations of conflict and social, family and individual breakdown caused by the construction of dams.

As a result, within the movement we have begun to reflect in greater depth about the ways in which this model of energy production through the construction of dams impacts on the lives of the women affected. The key questions now under discussion include the following: In addition to the gender inequality historically experienced by women, what are the main violations suffered by the women affected by dams? How are women impacted by the forced displacement caused by the construction of dams? What are the main challenges women must confront in the resistance struggle?

The main consequences for the lives of dam-affected people, which have even more of an impact on women, are of two types. The first is economic, resulting from the loss of land; the loss of family income due to the jobs that disappear, the pre-existing relations in production and marketing, and the various activities that are decimated by the flooding of reservoirs. The other type is emotional and psychological, because they see the places they live disappear, their entire relationship with their surroundings is dismantled, community structures and relations are destroyed, cultural traditions must be abandoned, and they face the insecurity of being forced to go and live elsewhere, worried about the lives of their children and the entire family.

The dams do not only impact on the lives of those living on the banks of rivers. The migration of thousands of workers to the regions where the projects are undertaken, as is happening with the dams under construction in Santo Antonio and Jirau (in the state of Rondônia), affect public health, housing and education services for the whole population. Another serious consequence is the increase in prostitution, teenage pregnancy and “single mothers” – a situation that directly affects women and contributes to the breakdown of families. We should also not forget the destruction of the environment.

WOMEN FIGHT BACK: What inspires us is the fact that, even when they are not seen, the affected women have always fought back. Tuíra, an indigenous woman from the state of Pará, is especially symbolic of these women. In 1989, the power company Eletronorte held a public hearing to discuss the construction of the Kararaô dam and hydropower plant (which was to be financed by the World Bank). During the hearing, while her fellow Kayapó warriors shouted “Kararaô will drown our children!”, Tuíra rose from the audience, ran up to Eletronorte president José Muniz Lopes, and held the blade of her machete to his face, a traditional gesture of threat. Her actions contributed to the suspension of the dam’s construction for ten years and the withdrawal of World Bank funding for the project.

In addition to Tuíra, there have been many other women warriors in the history of the struggle and resistance waged by MAB. The women who fought to defend their rights during the construction of the Machadinho dam, frequently clashing with the police; the women of Barra Grande who headed up the struggle; the women arrested in the struggle of the people affected by the Tucuruí dam; the women who have stopped company officials from entering the communities where there are dam projects in Bahia; the women affected by the hydroelectric dams in Rondônia who confronted officials from the big companies in the capital; all of the mothers who suffer as they watch their daughters prostitute themselves or get pregnant and end up as single mothers after being deceived and abandoned by construction workers, and yet never turn their backs on them; the women who cry over the loss of their land, their communities.

One of the great challenges we face is for these women to be increasingly recognized and valued.

And this why we must courageously continue to fight for justice, social equality and gender equality, so that women and men can be the subjects of a new history.

Water and energy are not commodities!

By MAB (Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens), sent by Sonia Mara, sdjsonia@yahoo.com.br, <http://www.mabnacional.org.br/>

(1) The CDDPH is the Brazilian state body equivalent to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The Council was created through Federal Law 4,319 of 16 March 1964 and is comprised of the following members: the Minister of Justice, a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a representative of the Federal Cultural Council, a representative of the federal Attorney General's Office, the president of the Federal Council of the Order of Attorneys of Brazil, the head professor of constitutional law and the head professor of criminal law at one of the federal universities, the president of the Brazilian Press Association, the president of the Brazilian Association of Education, and the leaders of the majority and the opposition in the Federal Chamber of Deputies and Senate. The Council has the power to initiate inquiries, investigations and studies to evaluate the effectiveness of rules to ensure human rights enshrined in the Federal Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), as well as to receive delegations denouncing human rights violations, determine their legitimacy, and adopt pertinent measures to punish the individuals or authorities responsible for these violations.