

“The dream of making a living from the land”: Amazon settler women as change agents “O sonho da terra”: mulheres assentadas na Amazônia como agentes de mudança

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to determine the role of women in the so called *caminhada* (march) to a land reform project in the State of Pará, Brazil. When a woman decides to join the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) (Landless Workers' Movement) she may enter into conflict with her social environment. In the light of the changes happening due to her militancy, I want to elucidate the reasons for her involvement, examine female contributions during the settlement process and the changes this process may cause in their lives. The analysis is based upon a fieldwork conducted in a land reform hamlet near the city of Castanhal in northeastern Pará. Three case studies of female militancy are examined. Some of the outcomes of this analysis are that the role of women in this process is prominent because they are its most important support; they are assuming pioneer functions, organizing domestic and public tasks in the settlement and play the role of articulators between the different households. Due to their militancy poor urban and rural women are able to step out of their invisibility, often suffered in Brazilian society, and make an important contribution to the construction of a new life.

Keywords: Amazon. Land reform settlements. Life-cycle. Survival strategies. Women. Peasants.

Resumo: A intenção do artigo é determinar o papel que as mulheres desempenham na chamada 'caminhada' para um assentamento da reforma agrária no estado do Pará, Brasil. Quando uma mulher decide participar do Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) corre o risco de entrar em conflito com o seu ambiente social. Em razão das mudanças verificadas devido à militância, investigo os motivos pelos quais as mulheres se envolvem no Movimento, examino as contribuições femininas durante o processo de assentamento e as mudanças que esse processo pode causar nas suas vidas. A análise está baseada em uma pesquisa de campo realizada em um assentamento da reforma agrária, próximo à cidade de Castanhal, no nordeste paraense. Três estudos de caso de militância feminina são examinados. Alguns dos resultados dessa análise mostram que o papel das mulheres nesse processo é proeminente, pois são os mais importantes suportes; assumem funções pioneiras, organizando tarefas domésticas e públicas no assentamento e articulando os diferentes grupos domésticos. Devido à militância, mulheres pobres das cidades e do campo saem da invisibilidade, situação comum na sociedade brasileira, e dão uma contribuição importante para a construção de uma nova vida.

Palavras-chave: Amazônia. Assentamentos da reforma agrária. Ciclo de vida. Estratégias de sobrevivência. Mulheres. Campesinato.

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The purpose of this paper is to determine the reasons for the active participation of women in the so called *caminhada* (march) to the João Batista settlement, a land reform colonization project in the State of Pará, Brazil. The Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra – MST) uses the term *caminhada* to summarize the whole land acquisition process, from the convocation of candidates to the granting of land in rural areas, to the concession of land titles by the National Institute for Colonization and Land Reform (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária – INCRA).

When a woman decides to participate in land squatting and protest demonstrations, or decides to take part in other activities pressuring landowners or State agencies, she may enter into conflict with her husband, friends and relatives, as observed in the case studies presented here. Therefore, I will not only discuss the reasons for female participation in the squatting process, but also examine what are the outcomes of such *caminhadas* for the women themselves and their families, and what changes this process may cause in their lives. I will proceed by reviewing concepts and theoretical elements used as guidelines in the analysis. I will consider social movements, specifically the MST, the issue of poor families, migration processes and the situation of poor women in suburban areas in Brazil.

LANDLESS WORKERS' MOVEMENT (MST)

According to the Movement's own description,

The MST is a national movement organized in 23 Brazilian States. Since 1984, the MST has been able to win land for approximately 250 thousand families, who live in 1,600 settlements. Ours is a reality in which landownership is highly concentrated: 1% of landowners own half of the land, while 4.8 million families are destitute of land. In this scenario, MST is also articulating 70,000 families who survive into 500 encampments scattered in Brazil (MST, 2002).

The MST emerged from claims of farmers and non-farmers with the support of the Catholic Church, claims of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), of unions and also claims of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and claims of ecclesiastic agencies abroad (Andrae, 1998, p. 99 and following; Leite, 1997). The Movement's motto was "occupy, resist, produce"¹ (Andrae, 1998, p. 103). Squatting and encampments constitute its main instruments, together with political training of squatters and new settlers and with the strengthening of the organization itself (Andrae, 1998, p. 103). The MST owns national, state and regional offices, from which militants organize and monitor activities held in encampments and settlements.

One of the pillars of MST philosophy is collectivism. It refers to collective land titles that were 'conquered' and to collective work pattern supposedly organized inside the settlements' productive units, as associations or cooperatives. Regarded as a strategy to access governmental funds such as credit facilities, the idea of collectivism suffers from criticism both inside and outside the organization. In southern Brazil a majority of militants opted for individual rights on agricultural land, obtained by the MST (Andrae, 1998, p. 146), even though the ideology of collectivism is continually stressed by the MST.

Though the MST defines itself as a mass movement inside the larger syndicated movement (Andrae, 1998, p. 107), I consider MST more as a representative of New Social Movements. The contribution of the New Social Movements consists in conquering social services for all citizens or for certain groups, which until then were excluded from a series of public services. Their action tries to reformulate relations between citizens and the State, as observed by Paoli (*apud* Andrae, 1998, p. 97; see also Martins, 1997). In that way MST action contributes towards redefining the rules of the game and the power balance in society².

¹ All translations are mine.

² For a further discussion and empirical examples of institutional change in the view of Institutional Economics see, for example, Acheson (1994) and Alston *et al.* (1996).

THE POOR FAMILY AND THE HOUSEHOLD

My intention is not to review and debate the vast literature available on poor family issues and households. I will merely present basic definitions used in this study. I follow Woortmann's definition of 'family', who mentions that "for the urban poor, 'family' signifies the domestic family or it may be a part of the 'kindred' (...)" (Woortmann, 1987, p. 60). As for domestic family, Woortmann follows Smith's view, who regards it as "a group of relatives and their dependants which constitutes a household" (Woortmann, 1987, p. 60). I myself will use the term 'household' as a group of individuals, whether or not they are related to each other, which live under the same roof and share and exchange goods and services (Wilk, 1989). These interchanges can also occur between interrelated social units. Individuals who normally form a social unit can be temporarily separated, in case of, for example, migration. After a period of separation, the former members of a unit can be reintegrated to it or form a new household, related to or independent from the original one.

Intimately linked to the concepts of household and family is the concept of the household cycle. This concept refers to the different stages of constitution, consolidation, aggregation, segmentation and separation of households. This process is characterized – among other aspects – by different ratios between producers and consumers inside the domestic unit. This last paradigm significantly influences decision making inside the household (Chayanov, 1977; Greenhalgh, 1985).

In areas of urban invasion (the case of Bahia, Northeastern State of Brazil) – meaning illegally occupied urban areas – a strong tendency toward matri-focality is observed, and in many cases households are constituted of maternal dyads (Woortmann, 1987)³. The preponderance of women is linked to their importance for household subsistence activities and in decision making related to family issues within the domestic group. Female dominance is also true in conjugal families because it is

not necessarily the male who is responsible for household income and he is not necessarily the house owner (Woortmann, 1987, p. 64-65). Women in general and mothers in particular are focal points of kinship systems and of the household (Woortmann, 1987, p. 288). The same statement is made by Wagley (1957) in his pioneer study of an Amazonian community. Wagley confirms the inconsistency of the "idealistic" assumption where the male assumes a chief or dominating position, as in many occasions it is the woman who is the central figure in the household and in kinship network. He explains this situation by the fact – among others – that in poor families, the husband is frequently absent, due to migration and other facts (Wagley, 1957, p. 231).

Another characteristic of conjugal unions among urban peripheral residents is their instability. Woortmann explains conjugal instability in regard to the difficult situation of poor men, who generally cannot reach the ideal of a husband-father and family provider (Woortmann, 1987, p. 66-67). Besides, Woortmann asserts that "(...) conjugal instability is correlated to a lack of broader implications in marital status and to female independence: more than independence, to its prevalence in the kinship system" (Woortmann, 1987, p. 115). According to the same author a correlation between conjugal stability and male occupational stability seems to exist (Woortmann, 1987, p. 138). A partner who does not satisfactorily develop his role runs the risk of being abandoned. Frequently it is not the woman who is abandoned; rather it is she who frees herself, with the support of relatives, from the "dead weight" of a "free-loading" companion (Woortmann, 1987, p. 303). Wagley points out that this weakness of marital unions also affects poor populations in Amazonian communities (Wagley, 1957, p. 256-257).

In the case of fisher families in eastern Amazonian communities described by Maneschy (2001, p. 177), the possibility for one or more group members' migrating is

³ I suppose that this reality is spread all over Brazil in poor urban populations. As will be evident this assumption verifies.

strongly linked to the life cycle stage of the nuclear family. The migration of poor rural population to urban centers or rural-rural migration in Brazil takes the form of a step migration. This type of migration is characterized by different moments in which families disperse and re-group. Maneschy (2001) describes this process in the following way: in a first moment of dispersion, children entering adulthood, apt to create their own families, leave the household, migrating to other places. Then, in a second moment parents integrate the newly established household of their children. Brothers, sisters and other relatives of the spouses can later follow the same paths, congregating with the relatives who are already established in the city (or other place in the countryside) (Maneschy, 2001, p. 177).

Above all, migration is a strategy to alleviate poverty and is an attempt to extend the economic bases of a given household, even though the spouses may not always re-encounter. According to Simonian (2001, p. 38), the fathers, brothers and husbands who migrate, hardly come back to their homes, leaving their wives abandoned. Simonian (2001, p. 38) evidences this reality in many of the Brazilian Amazon micro-regions, above all when men leave their families to prospect gold. In this context, Simonian (2001, p. 37) speaks of a feminization of poverty.

As main traits of poor families we may summarize: a certain tendency toward matri-focality and flexible household morphology, submitted to constant migratory movements between agricultural regions and cities. These migratory processes can, but may not always result in the reconstruction of the original household.

FEMALE ROLES

Despite a certain female preponderance, especially in poor urban populations, women are far from being valued in the public space. In the case of Amazonian fishing communities

female labor is seen as a supplement to masculine income and is hardly accepted as work, even in ideological terms (Maneschy, 2001, p. 167-168). The inferiority and dependence of women in relation to men originate in symbolic spheres where women are considered a source of danger and disorder, which is the background for social control over her (Motta-Maués, 1993, p. 181). This dangerous potentiality and its symbolic signification are related to the stages of the female reproductive cycle, and must be controlled. Even so, Motta-Maués (1993, p. 184, 192) confirms that all female dependence upon men is to be related to the exclusion of women in fishing, which constitutes the main economic activity of the community. The invisible character of female labor and the subordinated condition of women in fishing and agriculture⁴ (Maneschy, 2001; Wagley, 1957) contrasts with the female superiority pointed out by Woortmann (1987) in urban invasions.

Although social practices in fisher communities are described to be discriminatory against women, some women, such as widows or post-menopause females, are ideologically considered as men. These women, within certain limits, 'behave' as men and benefit from a series of liberties they had no access to in the past (Motta-Maués, 1993, p. 89-90). Woortmann (1987, p. 108) comments a similar phenomenon observed in urban peripheries. Middle aged women tend to gain visibility as their dependence upon men decreases. This state of dependence is related to procreation and to reduced female participation in salaried activities, when they depend in great measure upon relatives or neighbors willing to watch for small children (Woortmann, 1987, p. 63).

In recent years, women's social position progressed considerably in rural areas as well as in suburban neighborhoods. Beyond improvements in access to schooling, professional integration and employment,

⁴ Lourdes Furtado, anthropologist of the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi, agrees with the invisibility of women in Amazonian fishing communities and their subsequent devaluation. She qualifies that women take actively part in decision making in household economy. It is them who transgress household frontiers and it is them who articulate with the community. This takes place in Mother's Clubs in Fisher Movements and in women's participation in social movements (personal communication).

empowerment agents developed specific actions directed to female population. Among others the Basic Ecclesiastic Communities (Comunidades Eclesiásticas de Base – CEBs) strongly influenced by the Liberation Theology in Brazil, played an important role in the so called awareness-building process for women. As observed by Adriance (1996, p. 215 and following) women many times entered into conflict with their husbands when they attended CEB meetings. Within the CEB program for awareness-building processes for women, one of the major themes was women's social position, which contributed to an increase in self-esteem and to women's capacity to confront their husbands in case of conflicts (Adriance, 1996, p. 234).

THE CAMINHADA

FROM THE BACURI FARM TO THE JOÃO BATISTA SETTLEMENT

In the Amazon State of Pará are living approximately 13% of the beneficiaries of the Land Reform in Brazil and therefore Pará is the Brazilian State most affected by colonization in the Amazon with different outcomes (Abelém and Hébette, 1998; Moran, 1990). South and the Southeast of Brazil are historical MST focus points, and the movement has repeatedly tried to expand northward to the Amazon frontier. The MST has been present in Pará State since 1989 (Fernandes, 2000). Initially, its activities were concentrated in southern and southeastern Pará. Since 1992 the MST has tried to establish itself in the capital (Belém), but there were certain difficulties in the beginning.

For strategic reasons, the city of Castanhal, in the northeast of Pará State, was chosen as a MST base for action in the ancient colonization zone of the Bragantina region. Action began with meetings in popular and suburban neighborhoods of the city. The MST started by gathering data on individuals interested in obtaining land. Simultaneously, it listed farms that had dispossession potential in the region. Among others, the Bacuri Farm was identified. Preference was given to that farm because of

greater probabilities of success: it was common knowledge that the land title was a fake, and that its debts with banks were high.

The MST follows standard procedures used in almost all cases of occupancy and settlement, which were also adopted in this case. After having carried out the registrations, temporary encampments in Castanhal and Ananindeua were created. Ananindeua is a neighboring city of Belém, a common destination for rural migrants. Protests and marches were organized in Belém to pressure authorities to grant an area for the participants to settle. They were temporarily provided with food by churches, unions, and other sympathizers. Through support from relatives or their own resources, such as indemnities or occasional incomes, the occupants had to finance this phase of the *caminhada* by themselves.

On November 15 of 1998, occupation of the Bacuri farm was effected. Some 466 registered occupants and their families encamped on the grounds of the former Bacuri farm, that was baptized João Batista Settlement. There were moments of tension during the process; but no violent confrontations with the owner and his staff occurred. Inside the encampment were established mechanisms of coexistence according to MST pattern. Groups were created, composed of several occupants and their families. Each group chose its respective coordinator, who later joined the encampment council, sharing important information and making decisions related to every day life in the camp. Rules of coexistence and an internal code of behavior were implemented. The process is a selective one; only the individuals who comply with internal regulations succeed in fitting in. The others are expelled or leave on their own initiative.

Finally, after a period of uncertainty and instability, the proclamation of the Bacuri Farm dispossession (a part of it) was published on June 3rd of 2000 in the State Official Journal. In November 2000 the INCRA transferred to the João Batista Settlers Association a term of concession for the land, putting an end to the encampment phase and stabilizing the occupants'

situation. Later on, social and administrative structures were created inside the settlement by the 156 families who had remained. Only after having transferred the term of concession did the INCRA authorize distribution of food baskets for the families. The INCRA also granted resources for housing construction, under pressure from the Movement. Instead of contracting an enterprise to construct houses – as it occurs in conventional settlements – the community of the João Batista settlement bought the necessary materials collectively and built houses in *mutirão* (form of collective work). The registered participants and their respective families regrouped in nuclei composed of between five and ten families. A great majority of the families live close to each other and supposedly produce together. Each household disposes of 12.3 hectares (in theory), but the majority of the participants decided to transfer 80% of the land to the nucleus and to assign 20% to semi-collective use (euphemism for individual use). A formal association was created in order to – among other purposes – obtain government funding and set bases for a cooperative that would commercialize future settlement productions. Moreover, health, finances, gender, leisure, youth, communication and environmental commissions were created. At the head of each commission a settler was elected chairperson.

PROFILE OF THE JOÃO BATISTA SETTLEMENT POPULATION

The following information is mainly based upon interviews conducted by the author, which are complemented with some data extracted from the Development Plan of João Batista Settlement Project (Cardoso, 2001). During several weeks the author did fieldwork in the João Batista settlement, focusing initially on social institutions and dynamics in the settler community. After perceiving the importance of settler women's contribution to the community life, in-depth-interviews were made with several women. As the life stories of three settler women permit especially interesting insides into the relation between militancy and life-cycle-decisions, they were chosen as the data base for the following analysis.

More than 70% of the settlers come from the State of Pará, and approximately 10% from Maranhão and Ceará (Brazilian states). The remaining part originates from Amazonian and north-eastern States (Cardoso, 2001, p. 16).

The population is a highly mobile one. A large part of it has (remote) agricultural origins – at least until childhood – and later lived in different places, such as the State Capital (Belém) or its neighboring city Ananindeua, which turned itself into a sort of central destination for rural migrants. Before joining the João Batista Project most of the participants lived in suburban neighborhoods, characterized by high criminality and insecurity rates, and by deficient infrastructure.

Few of the later registered participants were, before settling in João Batista, working as farmers or rural workforce, however, frustrated experiences of agricultural settling were observed. When individuals return to rural life in agricultural areas, it is generally not in their original location. Internal state migration and state-to-state migration is constantly observed. Migration takes place in stages (step-migration).

A family can disperse itself in several locations, within articulated households. These units are not fixed. Their composition can temporarily or definitively change; they can re-group, add new members later on, or even disintegrate. There is a tendency toward matri-focality among the settler's original households (above all in urban neighborhoods).

Among and between households circulate resources, goods and services. There is a strong tendency toward inter-generational reciprocity. Children are indebted to the parents, especially when these are aged and ill. A strong familial solidarity exists, that exceeds the limits of the proper household or domestic family. In some cases the financial resources of households are extremely limited. Even the bus fare to send children to school can be out of the parents' reach. Even so, adaptability to hostile circumstances can be observed in the population. Space mobility as well as intra- and inter-group solidarity are strategic factors to ensure survival.

When employed in cities, participants work in the informal sector (retailers, occasional jobs, domestic work,

janitors) or in the formal sector (security agents, sale's clerks in supermarkets or warehouses). Whatever the position is, in a majority of cases, employment instability is high and pay is low, and everyone is exposed to the threat of quick layoff and unemployment. In all interviews, a strong desire to return to the rural world was noted ("o sonho de voltar para terra" or "the dream of making a living from the land"). According to observations, retirement or forced resignation become stimuli to look for alternatives to urban life.

According to observations, a majority of settlers in the João Batista settlement project were affiliated to one political party, or were active in a church (catholic as well as evangelical).

A condition for registering to the INCRA list is unemployment, either in the public or private sector; people often work in the informal sector. This condition led various candidates for an allotment of land reform to leave their (formal) jobs. After having settled officially in the countryside in an official encampment or land reform settlement, the participants are allowed to be formally employed.

In the following, to enlighten women's role in land reform and Landless Workers' Movement, the process from the point of view of three women who participated in the *caminhada* from the outset will be analyzed.

THREE WOMEN'S CAMINHADA TO THE JOÃO BATISTA SETTLEMENT

Female occupants played an active role in the *caminhada* to the João Batista settlement. These women took the initiative to join the Movement on their own and participated in occupations against the will of their respective companions. I chose three women between 41 and 51 years of age, at the end of their reproductive cycle but still with strong commitments to their children, to analyze the reasons for and the consequences of their participation in the *caminhada*.

One initial question was what the reasons were for these women to join the Movement. To answer

that question, I analyze their past situations, before their involvement in the Movement. The aim is to determine whether there were objective reasons for their involvement, and if their situation suffered changes after the settlement, in the context of the theoretical considerations previously outlined. The focus is on household morphology, multifocality in poor urban families, and on women's special situation when reaching the end of their reproductive cycle. When outlining women's motives for participation in the *caminhada* to the João Batista settlement, I sought to establish in what measure they corresponded to "the dream of making a living from the land" and what the other connotations to that desire there may be. Concerning eventual changes, attempted to relate women's participation in the *caminhada* to ulterior modifications observed in their lives. In addition, the *a priori* situation of these women and the original household morphology is compared with the morphology of the new established households in the João Batista settlement.

INITIAL SITUATION OF THE THREE WOMEN: LIFE-CYCLE, HOUSEHOLD SITUATION, INCOME AND HOUSING

Dona Dora is 51 years old. She is illiterate and left the Catholic Church for the (evangelical) Universal Church. She is from Maranhão State and is mother of ten children. Her children are between 15 and 32 years old. The oldest daughter, when adolescent, was the first family member to move to Ananindeua⁵. She followed the steps of her maternal aunt, sister of Dora, who was already living in Pará. Years later Dora's parents and eight of the ten children went to live in Ananindeua.

When the *caminhada* began, Dora was married. Dora and her husband were farmers their whole lives. They owned land and a house in the Maranhão countryside, where Dora was additionally running a small

⁵ For many people of the Maranhão countryside, Belém (capital of the state of Pará) and the neighbour Ananindeua are more points of reference than São Luis (capital of the state of Maranhão).

commercial point. Because of illness and of the absence of her children, Dora decided to move to Ananindeua and join them⁶. At first she lived in her oldest daughter's house, where some of the children, who had migrated to Pará, were already living. The older children were guaranteeing the subsistence of the household. When she left, it was decided that Dora's husband was to stay in Maranhão, in order to sell the property and later join the rest of the family in Ananindeua.

Dona Carmem is 46 years old and comes from the rural area of Manaus, but lived in Belém since she was eleven. She is mother of five children of between 16 and 28 years of age whom she raised alone. They all live together in her house in Belém. She has had an agitated life trajectory. She likes to comment about her own life, saying that her father was a Brazilian Indian and her mother a Peruvian Indian, that she had done almost everything in her life, that she has been housekeeper, slave, and stevedore in Belém's main market place, in short: she has worked in a series of activities, but "never prostituted herself". She had two husbands with whom she had her children. At the beginning of the occupation she had a companion, but they were not living together.

Because of her very mobile lifestyle, she repeated her first high-school years three times. She had several jobs, until finally fixing as retailer in one of Belém's open markets, where she owns three stalls that sustain her family. Among other activities, she participates in the organization of small retailers in Belém and is a political party activist.

Dona Andréia is 42 years old and comes from a *Quilombo* (Afro Brazilian community)⁷ located in the rural area of Castanhal. Her parents were farmers. At the age of ten she migrated with her parents to Belém, where she studied and worked in several places. She did not complete her senior high-school year and could not obtain her health technician graduation certificate.

She is married and has three children of between four and 12 years of age. The youngest daughter lives with her in the settlement, and her two sons live in her mother's house in Belém. Her last job took her to work together with Dona Carmem in an open market in Belém. Her husband worked as refrigeration technician in occasional jobs.

In these three cases the women have completed their reproductive cycle. One of them (Andréia) is still fully responsible for all of her children. She relies on her mother's support, who lives in Belém and takes care of her grandchildren. Her older children look after the younger ones.

Comparing the three case studies, it is obvious that in all of them the children live together outside the encampment. In terms of elementary nucleus family status, Dona Dora hoped to reconstitute her household and once again live with her children, who reside in Belém. This was one of the reasons why she moved from Maranhão to the city of Ananindeua. Dona Carmem's household was under her leadership almost all of its existence. She points out that even when her successive husbands integrated the group, she was the one leading economic matters. Andréia together with her husband and children integrated an extensive family, commanded by her mother. The comparison of the three cases in terms of profession and income reveals: Dora is a farmer with no urban labor experience and 100% dependent upon her children from the moment on she moved to Ananindeua. Carmem already was a micro-entrepreneur and head of the domestic family. She had financial independence, but needed and still needs her children's workforce. Andréia contributed to the family income selling in an open market. Andréia's domestic family, as well as Dora's, is – economically speaking – in a vulnerable situation.

⁶ The lack of appropriate medical care is a common reason to move from the countryside to the capital in the North of Brazil. Therefore it is important to dispose of a solid social (kinship) network.

⁷ *Quilombo* denominates a former refuge of slaves, whose inhabitants nowadays enjoy special (land) rights.

THE PROCESS OF INTEGRATION INTO THE MOVEMENT AND IN THE ENCAMPMENT: MOTIVATION, CONTACT, CHANGES

Dora's motivation to join the movement is understood as a consequence of her husband's non-adaptation to life in Ananindeua. As it had been planned, he left Maranhão and regrouped with the rest of the family in Ananindeua. Even though they had built a house in Ananindeua, he decided to go back to his homeland in Maranhão because he could not adapt to urban life. As a result of that situation, Dora decided to integrate the Movement during an enrolment campaign the MST promoted in Ananindeua. Dora's oldest son pushed her to enroll during his own registration. Together, they participated in encampments and MST actions. The expectations she had that her husband would come back were frustrated when he condemned the MST's actions, after having occupied a land together with Dora over a period of three days. He traveled back to Maranhão and afterwards met another woman. Dora, after consulting her children, decided to keep on her "fight for land" with the MST, and remained in the squatting process of the former Bacuri Farm.

Carmem became aware of MST actions by chance. She was present at a meeting organized on Labor Day at the open market of Belém. A year passed before this first contact gave way to a deeper involvement, when she was invited, as political activist, to visit an urban encampment organized by the Movement. She then registered to the land candidates list, provoking discussions and arguments with her companion. Her motives for enrolling were political (identification with the Movement's claims) and financial, for she apprehended her involvement as an opportunity to expand her economical activities. During the process of occupation, she and her companion separated because of diverging opinions related to land occupation and associated actions.

Andréia was stimulated to enroll in the Movement by Carmem and another friend, with whom she had worked at the open market. She joined the Movement without the support of her husband or relatives. During the encampment

phase and the initial moments of the settlement, she and her husband argued intensely about her participation in the *caminhada*. Her motives were existential, related to extreme economic conditions. She felt her household had no other choice than to follow whatever way out of extreme poverty.

It is interesting to observe that in these three cases the women were the ones who contacted the Movement and that the respective husbands or companions disapproved or were opposed to their involvement. Besides, it appears clearly that personalized contacts favored the integration to the Movement. It seems all three of them were pursuing their "dream of making a living from the land", with high expectations of better days. We can also notice that in the three cases presented great autonomy was demonstrated, the women participating alone in the *caminhada*, without jeopardizing the rest of the family. Even though Dona Carmem enjoys a more comfortable position, all three of them hope to find security and economic well-being. Differently from Dona Carmem's case, Andréia and Dora's family economic bases are extremely weak, and their survival depends upon strong familial solidarity and personal ethics. In their case the MST proposal is promising even though it implies great sacrifices, especially during the phase of squatting. Two out of the three women separated from their companions because of their insertion in the Movement and because of their participation in the *caminhada* for land. Even so Andréia took a risk in her matrimonial life, but her husband, unlike the others, joined her in the settlement. Participation in the *caminhada* constitutes a turning point in all of their lives.

LIFE IN THE SETTLEMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WOMEN AND THE HOUSEHOLD

Given the proximity of two important urban centers such as the Greater Belém (including Ananindeua) and Castanhal, once permanently settled in João Batista, women try to conciliate settlement related tasks with obligations linked to their households of origin in the city. This is a widespread characteristic shared by the majority of the women living in the João Batista settlement. An important proportion of

women constantly travel to the city to visit their households of origin, which aggregates their relatives, parents or children.

Because of the settlement's short lifetime production has not yet reached large scales. Production is still mainly for subsistence. The settlers are also involved in extractive activities. Part of the group, such as the women presented here, share responsibilities within the settlement or within the Movement. A year after the settlement had been established, the participants were still surviving through financial support from urban relatives or through occasional jobs out of the settled area. If we consider that the occupation and the encampment process lasted two years, it becomes evident that settler had to endure a total of three years of difficulties hoping for better days. This fact required great motivation and capacity to take risks on the part of the occupants and later settlers. I will now analyze what where the outcomes of this process.

Even though Dora and her husband separated during the occupation process, she proceeded in the *caminhada* with her children's consent and with the support of her eldest son, who settled together with her. He became an MST activist while participating in the *caminhada*. As a result he was transferred to another settlement project in Tocantins, leaving behind wife and children. The couple broke up. As a consequence his former wife, who did not wish to stay in João Batista, abandoned their house and lost their land reform registration. Dora, after her son and her daughter-in-law had left, remained in the settlement without any relatives. In the following, she assumed the position of secretary of her nucleus. Apart from that function, she does not assume other public responsibilities in the settlement. Her children continue living in Ananindeua, where she constantly goes to visit. In the settlement she sustains herself with local resources, aiming at making a living from local productions (in great part derived from extractivism). From time to time she brings her produce to her children in the city.

Although she wanted to re-aggregate her former household and bring her husband to Pará, she had to take

note of the failure of her project. She then gave a new direction to her life and personal development meeting a settler of her age and built a new home together with him and his children. Despite all difficulties, she is satisfied with her new condition in the settlement, and persists in pursuing her options, dedicating most of her time to farming and – in the future – to a small retail store. Her younger children are in an awkward situation, sustained by the good will of their elder brothers and through occasional jobs. Dora provides, whenever she can, products from farming and from her extractivist activities. But generally they have to survive on their own. The oldest daughter, as well as the younger children, believes living in João Batista offers no future, because they would have to become farmers, which, in their eyes, is not an attractive perspective: they value much more urban jobs. The double or multiple residence pattern of Dora and her family will prevail in these circumstances.

In the MST-hamlet Dona Carmem assumes the position of health commissioner. As a consequence she travels constantly, participating in courses and giving orientation in MST-encampments. Because of her political activist background, she successfully fitted into the Movement. On a personal level, as previously mentioned, she separated from her husband during the occupation phase. He refused to live with her and did not assume financial or emotional responsibilities within the family, which probably also led her to opt for separation.

Because of her settlement in João Batista, her oldest daughter, her son-in-law and their children moved in and integrated her household. Nowadays, they are settled in the nearby MST Roseli Nunes encampment. When Carmem travels or needs occasional assistance, her son-in-law assumes her daily tasks. Carmem in exchange offers financial support. None of her other children wanted to come to João Batista. Nowadays she is living alone in the settlement, enjoying constant visits of her grandchildren.

She regularly travels to the city, orientating her children and supervising her businesses. The three stalls she owns at the open market of Belém are still

functioning. She is still committed to the small retailers association of the open market, of which she used to be President. Because of her activities in the city, she and her household of origin benefit from continuous income. Even so she expects good farming opportunities in João Batista and is thinking of developing commercial projects in the settlement. She believes the settlement represents a means of expanding her economic bases. It appears clearly that Carmem is much more aware of the economic possibilities within the settlement than the other two women presented. This can be explained by her past – and present – activities as small entrepreneur.

Because of Dona Andréia's formal education (junior undergraduate with health specialization), she assumed the position of health counselor in the settlement and receives a minimum wage. She entered a nursing school training promoted by the City of Castanhal. In addition, she is treasurer for the Settlers Association, which means that when someone or a group in João Batista is granted governmental aid, she or her substitute has to accompany the process in Castanhal. She dedicates a great deal of her time to that activity and occasionally cannot fulfill her duties in her nucleus. Usually, she is excused of fulfilling her working obligation by her nucleus in compensation for her dedication to the settlement. Sometimes her husband takes over her tasks in the nucleus. She also travels to participate in other MST meetings, which at first provoked innumerable discussions with her husband, who finally accepted the situation.

Inside the household she is the one taking initiatives, even though she is a calm and thoughtful individual. She participated in the occupation together with her small daughter. Only subsequently, when the situation in the settlement had stabilized, did her husband leave his urban position and join them. Today, Andréia, her daughter and her husband live together in João Batista. The elder sons

live in the city with their grandmother. Andréia does not want them to live permanently in João Batista until a high-school is built in the settlement, because good education for her children is fundamental for her.

Some of Andréia's relatives successively moved in to João Batista. Her older brother incorporated Andréia's nucleus and lives next to her house (in her old shelter) with his wife and children. They were accepted by the nucleus because of his knowledge in breeding cattle, a future income generating project of the João Batista settlement. But as aggregated elements to his sister's household, and like all newcomers, he does not have rights on the land; for that reason he is thinking in settling in the nearby MST project Roseli Nunes. As an officially registered participant, there he may obtain rights to some land. In addition to her brother, Andréia wishes to draw in her nephew and his family, in the hope that he could give up his drinking habit⁸.

For the time the family subsistence is sustained through Andréia's wage, by means of extractivism in the settlement and through her husband's occasional income, her brother is hired inside or outside the settlement as agricultural workforce. Andréia confesses that she would not be living in João Batista if she had had alternatives, such as a full graduation and a good urban position. She believes that only really needy people are willing to settle in the harsh conditions she has experienced. She is convinced that the future of her children will be ensured by a good education.

In all three cases we note that invariably household re-composition in the encampment and subsequently in the settlement brought changes to the women and their relatives. They respond to those changes with high capacity of adaptation. The migration strategies observed are characterized by individual initiatives, reconstituting the household only when the situation in the settlement is stabilized. What draws the attention was the fact that women more than men, in these special cases, put

⁸ Alcoholism seems to be very high among volunteers at the beginning of the *caminhada*. As the consumption of alcohol is completely forbidden during the occupation period and controlled afterwards, several settlers succeeded in abandoning alcohol.

themselves at risk and confronted unknown situations. In previously collected examples from João Batista settlement, husbands, fathers and brothers were the ones who would take the decision to migrate, leaving their women to look after the household. It also seems that assuming responsibilities inside the Movement facilitated the insertion of the three women and their identification to it. Dona Carmem did not use the word 'grow' randomly when she referred to her situation inside the settlement. Assuming functions inside the settlement and inside the Movement helps women to improve their possibilities.

The three women presented here name the Movement's slogan – "the dream of making a living from the land" – to justify their involvement in the *caminhada*. As a common characteristic, all three have terminated their reproductive cycle, but all of them are, more or less, still economically and socially responsible for their children. As the children are now becoming of age, the women's dependence on them lessens and vice versa and their extra-household-activities increase. All three of them jeopardized their marital status by participating in the *caminhada*. They had to face conflicts within their social environment, which sometimes did not approve of their involvement in the MST. Let us now review the elements that answer the initial questions referring to the reasons for the women's engagement and to the changes it brought to them and to their family.

FINAL REMARKS

We must highlight, in this context, the MST and the conditions it creates for changes to occur in the women's lives. The MST represents a chance, an opportunity and a guarantee during the whole process. From the participants' point of view, at the start of the process, the MST, before being a conscious political option, offers easy access to land and housing in rural areas. The ideological option is constructed during the course of the process by the participants of the *caminhada*. The MST, during the initial stages of the migration as in other moments of transition

and insecurity, constitutes a guarantee. This role is usually assumed, in conventional migrations, only by relatives and friends. Woortmann (1987, p. 30) evokes in this context a sort of "anticipatory socialization" done by formerly migrated relatives. In addition, as demonstrated, the MST and the João Batista settlement project offer institutionalized solutions for oncoming relatives, once the registered participants have definitely settled.

In the first phase of the João Batista settlement described here the success of the model is explained by an accommodation between necessities and aspirations of women, and emerging structures of the settlement as there are the organization in nucleus, collective land titles, collective working patterns and the pooling of credits. Through collective action, reciprocal support in agricultural activities should be guaranteed within each nucleus. The individual is not solely responsible for the production. It is an important point to remember that the majority of the settlers do not originate from rural areas, but come from urban environments and therefore need to improve their agricultural knowledge. Collective working patterns allow mobility, which, in the case of women with children in the city, is important. Pooling credits in the nucleus alleviates situations where participants have no capital, as occurs in a majority of cases. Since the analysis details only the first moments of the settlement, when agricultural production is just beginning, it is still too early to assess the sustainability of this model. In the future the settlement will have to address problems related to accountancy of working days, distribution of profits, and commitment in credit payment. Without supportive action from the State – such as food baskets, housing financed by the INCRA, and credits for payment of production means, obtained on the pressure from the MST – most of the participants would not have had the possibility or the motivation to settle in a rural area. In that way the MST redefines the rules of the game, as mentioned earlier in this text. The participants of the *caminhada* learned to claim their rights and to make use of their citizenship.



Let us return to the reasons for women's participation in the *caminhada*. One of the most important motives why women participate in the Movement is their responsibility toward their families. Prolonged female responsibility for their domestic family is due to economic and social vulnerability, as a consequence of the adverse living conditions in the urban centers and, as mentioned earlier, male absence and their – if present – economic weakness. Thus, we can identify differentiated motives among the cases we presented. Andréia, for example, joined the *caminhada* because of a lack of economic opportunities in the city. To her, living in the settlement represents elaborating and conducting a personal professional project, something she could not do in the city. On the other hand Carmem considers the settlement as an economic opportunity. She wants to expand her existing urban economic bases. Dora wants to reestablish her status as a farmer and live again with her husband, but, as we have seen, her plans failed. Her motivation was in that sense very 'conservative'. The "dream of making a living from the land" appears to hide diverse meanings, and cannot be restricted merely to a desire to become a farmer or as the late Lygia Sigaud, from the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, interpreted this request, as a desire for independence⁹.

Because as the children of these three women are grown up, the women gained certain independence. Even so, to participate in the *caminhada* and settle is only possible if the maternal family or the children themselves support the initiative. In Andréia's case, it is her mother who takes care of the children who still study in the urban high-school. In Dona Carmem's case, the children take care of her business in the city. Even so, she feels responsible for their well-being and constantly travels to visit them. In Dona Dora's case, the older children take care of the younger ones.

In the particular case of these three women, as in the case of most of the settlers of the João Batista settlement, we noticed that the families are to be analyzed in their rural-urban-relationship. Reconstruction of the household,

in the presented cases, invariably leads to changes in its composition. New couples establish themselves and in the case of Andréia, a new matri-focal unit was created. We witnessed systems of double residency pattern (rural and urban), linked to responsibilities toward children and to economical necessities. From an epistemological point of view, the reality of households in the settlement cannot be understood if the supra-local familial network and the articulation in-between household are not taken into consideration. Analyzing the reality of the settlers' families as a whole, only from inside the settlement only reveals the tip of the iceberg of the social networking of the settlers.

During the installation of relatives in the settlement, a step migration model is repeated; in fact, the MST elaborated and institutionalized a new formula. The registered participant's relatives move in and are aggregated to her/his household, and later on join the nearby encampment. It is a way to manage land scarcity and avoid eventual conflicts resulting from the fact that the newcomers did not participate in the *caminhada*, and did not participate in the collective socialization process.

We can observe changes in various aspects of the roles of these women. In fact all of them are women who already had important roles in their respective families before the *caminhada* began. In that sense the MST and the João Batista settlement gave them a chance to express and strengthen their potentialities. These potentialities can be expressed for example through the public responsibilities they now assume, such as nucleus secretary, health counselor or Movement activist, traveling around the State and participating in meetings.

I believe that one of the most important outcomes of (female) participation in popular social movements is the improvement of self-esteem. In this regard the result of this enquiry coincides with the outcomes of a former research undertaken in a shantytown of Santiago de Chile, where women declared to feel more self-confident due to participation in a community development initiative (Naase, 1990). In this case, activities were supported by a private

⁹ Personal communication.

initiative, lacking the ideological framework provided by the MST, in the Brazilian case. Maybe, after all, the ideological framework plays not that prominent role, militants of the MST are presuming. The role of women in this process is prominent because they are its focal point, assuming pioneer functions, organizing domestic and public tasks in the settlement, assuming the role of articulators among households. In this way women are able to step out of the invisibility mentioned at the beginning of this paper. In addition, women are the ones who bear the weight of insecurity during the process, bound to the harshness of the *caminhada*. Women are the ones who attempt to conciliate the double residency imposed by the process, responding to multiple demands that call for enlarging economic bases, satisfactory education for the children, and maintaining urban bases, as a means of alleviating the difficult living conditions urban and rural poor suffer in the Amazon.

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