

# A Caldron of Militancy: Construction of Feminine Consciousness in the Movimento Sem-Terra

A Community Study in Palmares II

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## Abstract

The role of women in the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra is a unique discourse connected to agrarian reform movements and Brazilian machismo. Current literature on women in the MST reveals conflicting levels of participation. During occupations and the building of *acampamentos* women are remembered for their aggressive fighting and high levels of involvement. However, once *acampamentos* become established *assentamentos* history has shown levels of participation to dramatically drop, as women return to traditional roles. Sexism and machismo have both been identified historically as problems in the landless movement. The objective of this paper was to contribute to the debate on the participation of women in the Movimento Sem-Terra. Eight interviews were conducted with women in Palmares II, Pará and directors of the MST Regional Office to determine the reality of female participation in an MST settlement; questions focused on understanding obstacles, progress, objectives, and personal experiences with the MST. Between a literary review of the historic role of women in the MST, an examination of the politically enabling structure of the organization, and a study of the realities of femininity in an MST settlement, we found that rather than conflicting, these dual perceptions of female participation reveal the particular struggles taking place in the current debate on women's place in society and activism. The intersection of these discourses revealed that within the walls of Brazilian machismo society, the landless movement has opened a space for the creation of a feminine consciousness: a consciousness that evolves the political ideologies of women and challenges the constructs from which it has been created.

## Resumo

O papel das mulheres no Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra possui um discurso singular relacionado à reforma agrária e ao machismo brasileiro. Durante as ocupações e a construção dos acampamentos, as mulheres são lembradas por sua luta agressiva e pelos altos níveis de participação. Entretanto, uma vez que os acampamentos tornam-se assentamentos, a história tem mostrado que os níveis de participação diminuem drasticamente e as mulheres voltavam às suas funções tradicionais. Sexismo e machismo têm sido identificados historicamente como problemas no movimento sem-terra. O objetivo desse estudo foi o de contribuir com esse debate sobre a participação das mulheres no Movimento Sem-Terra. Este estudo realizou entrevistas com oito mulheres do Assentamento Palmares II, no estado do Pará e com diretores do escritório regional do MST para entender a realidade da participação das mulheres num assentamento de MST. As perguntas enfocaram o entendimento de obstáculos, progressos, objetivos e experiências pessoais com o MST. Entre uma revisão literária da função histórica das mulheres no MST, um exame da estrutura de organização de incentivo político às mulheres e um estudo das realidades de feminismo num assentamento de MST, nós encontramos que mais que conflitivas, essas duas percepções da participação das mulheres revelaram os esforços particulares que ocorrem nesse debate atual sobre a função das mulheres na sociedade e no ativismo. A intersecção desses discursos revelaram que entre as paredes do machismo brasileiro, o movimento sem-terra tem aberto um espaço para a criação duma consciência feminina: uma consciência que envolve as ideologias políticas das mulheres e desafia as bases sobre as quais esta tem sido construída.

I would like to express my gratitude to the community of Palmares II for welcoming me into their lives and helping me accomplish my research, to Vonda and Jorge and their four children for accepting me so graciously into their home, to Pablo and Foginho for dutifully walking with me in the heat of the day to find women to interview, and especially to the eight women that took time out of their work to sit and talk with me. Thank you to the Movimento Sem-Terra for making this incredible experience possible!

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*The new woman and the new man are within us. But it is necessary to awaken them and let them bloom, to construct together a new way of society.*

-Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra

On the seventh of March 2007, women of La Via Campesina, organized by the landless movement, occupied the Cargill port in Sao Paulo, leading a “women in defense of food sovereignty campaign.”<sup>1</sup> A day earlier, several groups of women led marches in support of four land occupations throughout Brazil.<sup>2</sup> Years previously, women began their active participation in the landless struggle. Authors Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford recall one of these critical moments when women influenced the future of feminine participation in the landless movement’s ideology. In a face off in Rio Grande do Sul between settlers and government troops, women and children moved to the front lines, stopping the government from violently evicting the settlers. These proved unbreakable lines, and women began using their solidarity to change the landless movement. Surrounding harvesting machines, the women demanded redistribution of the harvest and sought out more equal land distribution.<sup>3</sup> Wright and Wolford suggest that women have often “proved more determined and aggressive than the men” in this landless struggle.<sup>4</sup>

In the same analysis of women’s participation in the landless movement, Wright and Wolford suggest that “sexism and ‘machismo’ remain major problems in the movement” and that as a result only a “handful” of women held leadership positions in the Amazon.<sup>5</sup> They even ventured to say that they felt lucky to be able to talk to one of the few women they could get in touch with in Palmares II, suggesting that machismo and sexism were so pervasive that it was “difficult to interview women.”<sup>6</sup> Wright and Wolford have created what seem to be two conflicting discourses of the role of women in the MST. On the one hand, they claim that women have politically organized themselves to become leaders in defending encampments, and on the other they suggest that the landless movement is actually riddled by the machismo influences of Brazilian society, inhibiting the ability of women to participate. We must ask how these opposing discourses can fit together, what they reveal about each other, and most importantly, what they really say about the participation of women in the Movimento Sem-Terra. Between a literary review of the historic role of women in the MST, an examination of the politically enabling structure of the organization, and a study of the realities of femininity in an MST settlement, we will find that rather than conflicting, Wright and Wolford’s dual perceptions of female participation reveal the particular struggles taking

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<sup>1</sup> Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra, <http://www.mstbrazil.org/>, viewed 4 May 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil*, (Oakland, CA: 2003), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Wright and Wolford, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Wright and Wolford, 256.

<sup>6</sup> Wright and Wolford, 256.

place in the current debate on women's place in society and activism. The intersection of these discourses reveals that within the walls of Brazilian machismo society, the landless movement has opened a space for the creation of a feminine consciousness: a consciousness that evolves the political ideologies of women and challenges the constructs from which it has been created.

## **I. Introduction: History and Organization of Women's Rights in the MST**

The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra provides a particularly intriguing backdrop for this study of feminine politicization. The discussion of the rights of women entered the landless movement discourse as early as 1988 when the Federal Constitution formally established land rights for women.<sup>7</sup> However, author Carmen Deere suggests that despite this formalized access to land and growing support from rural unions for women's rights in agrarian reform, little actually changed in respect to implementing these new rights.<sup>8</sup> She writes that between 1985 and 1996 "none of the rural social movements, but particularly the MST, were very effective advocates for women's land rights," and that only in 2001 after five years of increasing gender concerns were mechanisms adopted for the "inclusion of women in agrarian reform."<sup>9</sup> Despite the founding objectives of the MST to provide for "a more just and egalitarian society" by "encouraging participation of women at all levels," Deere suggests that these gender sensitivities have only recently become of significant concern to the MST.<sup>10</sup> The MST's story of women's participation is complicated by the difference in involvement between *acampamentos* and *assentamentos*. As can be easily perceived perusing the latest articles on the MST's news feed, and recognized by Wright and Wolford, women are active participants in the land occupations (forming the *acampamentos*). Deere remarks that they make up as much as one-half of all participants in the occupations and continue to play a "very active and key role" in the *acampamentos* which follow.<sup>11</sup> However, once the *acampamentos* officially become *assentamentos*, history has shown female participation to significantly drop. Members of the National Commission of Women of the MST observed in 1988 that "once the land is won, a large number of women in the *assentamentos* return to their own private work, on the individual plot, in the home, and with the children."<sup>12</sup> As a direct result of this lack of participation in the *assentamentos*, Deere concludes that "in its initial years, the

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<sup>7</sup> Carmen Diana Deere, "Women's Land Rights and Rural Social Movements in the Brazilian Agrarian Reform," Journal of Agrarian Change (Jan-Apr 2003): 257-288, 258.

<sup>8</sup> Deere, 258.

<sup>9</sup> Deere, 260.

<sup>10</sup> Deere, 272.

<sup>11</sup> Deere, 272.

<sup>12</sup> Comissão Nacional de Mulheres do MST, "Avançar na luta," Jornal Sem Terra (São Paulo), No. 72 April, 1988, 18.

MST gave little concern to gender issues.”<sup>13</sup> True to this situation, the National Commission of Women of the MST “ceased to function after 1989” under the fear that gender issues would be divisive for the movement.<sup>14</sup>

In its earliest years, then, gender in the landless movement was a matter of mobilization at the occupation level, and it is important to recognize that the MST has received credit for beginning the mobilization of women in matters of agrarian reform. Author Julia Guivant suggests that “since the emergence of the MST women have played an important role in mobilizations, land invasions and encampments. Especially in the case of land occupations women tend to assume organizational tasks, and in some cases they are more present in the encampments, while the men look for alternative sources of income for the family.”<sup>15</sup> Despite this early mobilization, Guivant supports the arguments of Deere that after a settlement has been won, “women’s participation in general decisions and in the internal organization of the settlement tends to decline, and they return to traditional roles.”<sup>16</sup> However, as with the rest of the rural social movements, gender concerns began to work their way into the structure of the MST, influencing the role of women at more than just the encampment level. A telling example of this burgeoning respect for the role of women in the landless movement is the National Women’s Collective, created in 1996 with the goal that “discussions on ‘Gender and Women’s Issues’ shall run across all MST courses and meetings.”<sup>17</sup> This national collective, among many objectives, worked to politically organize women in both *acampamentos* and *assentamentos*. It also opened a discourse within the MST to “end the discrimination against women and promote their participation.”<sup>18</sup> Over the last decade this debate has certainly become nationalized, helping to create discussions against that same machismo Wright and Wolford recognized in *Palmares II*.

Essential in nationalizing this debate has been the growing number of women leaders in the MST. Guivant remarks that when women are in leadership positions they help to spur on change at the settlement level. She writes, “Women leaders have emerged in the MST and assumed a dominant position in regional and national meetings of the movement, and, more recently have raised the need for change in gender relations in the settlements themselves.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, despite this growing leadership of women, Guivant suggests that it has not necessarily been at leadership levels

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<sup>13</sup> Deere, 273.

<sup>14</sup> Deere, 274.

<sup>15</sup> Julia S. Guivant, “Agrarian Change, Gender and Land Rights: A Brazilian Case Study,” *Social Policy and Development Programme Paper Number 14* (June 2003): United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Guivant, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Diana Huet de Guerville, “Eco Feminist Principles Firmly Planted in Landless Movement,” *Herizons* 16.3 (Winter2003) 6-7, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Deere, 277.

<sup>19</sup> Guivant, 23.

that women have been able to best demand change, but rather in the spaces opened by MST involvement. She writes that it was often “between such meetings that the women exchanged ideas and shared experiences,” finding that from the “backstage of the movement” women were able to start up gender discussions. Guivant remarks that slowly, women’s leadership roles began to take on more “legitimacy”, as was demonstrated by the 1996 creation of the National Women’s Collective.<sup>20</sup> The debate reached beyond women and to a larger landless movement audience when the National Women’s Collective became the National Gender Collective in 1999. The goal of this change was in hopes of creating a “‘cultural revolution’ in the relations between men and women.”<sup>21</sup> Most observers since have recognized a certain level of success in these campaigns for women’s rights in the landless movement. One woman recalled how after “struggling for equality” in her landless community, women now have “an equal say in making decisions and can perform any tasks that they are interested in taking on.”<sup>22</sup>

With this new awareness of gender concerns since the mid 1990s, the MST has continued its work in incorporating women into its organizational structure. At the very lowest level of MST coordination, the *nuclei de base*—organizing a few families within a community, one man and one woman are elected as representatives to both lead the nucleus and coordinate with the community base. Each community then elects its own two representatives, one man and one woman to coordinate with the regional level. The region sends two people to the state level and the state to the national level, each time respecting the gender equality of representation. In this way, the landless movement encourages what it sees as “the need to end inequality in gender relations.”<sup>23</sup> A second display of the MST’s newly founded respect for women’s rights is the inclusion of gender in the breakdown of the landless movement’s work. One of eight sectors created by the MST to implement its goals, the gender sector “facilitates discussion of gender relations within MST and encourages women to engage with and direct the movement-to be subjects and not merely objects of history.”<sup>24</sup> The landless movement recognizes the need for this facilitation and encouragement of women because they are a movement within the greater constructs of Brazilian society. Though one of their principles is “the transformation of society,” they recognize that they cannot become “an island within society”<sup>25</sup> free from the influences of sexism and machismo. Though the MST does not have a policy for gender quotas within their national leadership, women’s participation has dramatically increased, with 9 out of 21 leaders of the National Committee being women in 2001.

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<sup>20</sup> Guivant, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Deere, 278.

<sup>22</sup> Guerville, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra, <http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=gendersector>, viewed 26 May 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



It is interesting to examine the tasks of the Gender Collective (the 1999 counterpart of the Women's Collective) in relation to this study of women's participation and the many dialogues through which the landless movement is currently working with gender issues. Guivant writes that "the main tasks of the National Gender Collective were to discuss ways to expand women's participation in an egalitarian fashion with a view to changing gender relations in the movement and in the rural way of life, and to create and promote new values. These included solidarity, and aesthetic and lifestyle values."<sup>26</sup> By connecting women's participation to solidarity and lifestyle values, the National Gender Collective is able to stratify this debate across the landless movement. Furthermore, the collective purposefully seeks to "stimulate the discussion of gender issues, among both women and men,"<sup>27</sup> enabling further mobilization at the community level.

As has been demonstrated, a historical review of women in the landless movement suggests that there is a disconnect between levels of politicization in occupations and settlements. Yet, the burgeoning role of women demonstrated in recent leadership trends and in the organization of the landless movement's coordination suggests that the role of gender in the MST is still being determined. This study will attempt to contribute to this literature and to current debates on roles of women in the landless movement. While current literature on the MST focuses on women assuming a variety of leadership roles and their active participation in occupations, less has been published about what forms of politicization may currently be taking place within the settlements. Guivant concludes with a rather grim outlook on gender in the landless movement, stating that "among the general demands of the MST, no reference to women's specific rights is to be found, nor does the political discourse integrate a gender perspective. Only recently have some activities, geared toward transforming gender relations in the settlements, been initiated as part of the activities of collectives."<sup>28</sup> Despite these initiatives, she concludes that "in spite of women's strong political participation since its beginning, and although a number of national-level women leaders have emerged from the MST, discrimination is still strong within the movement; general political issues are formulated with the exclusion of women's specific demands, and a gendered perspective has not even been incorporated into the general discourse."<sup>29</sup> It will be the goal of this study to examine what may be inhibiting women from further politicization once an *acampamento* becomes an *assentamento*, and most importantly, to assess where gender stands in an MST settlement in 2007: how women are becoming involved and how this can contribute to current debates on women's roles in the landless movement.

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<sup>26</sup> Guivant, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Guivant, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Guivant, 28.

<sup>29</sup> Guivant, 39.

## II. Justification and Objectives

From this conflicting backdrop of historical inequality and the realities of women's participation, we can move to a study of the political consciousness of women in the landless movement. Wright and Wolford made us aware of current struggles with gender equality and the successful extent to which women have become actively involved in the movement. A history of women's land rights and gender equality in agrarian reform revealed another discourse that would seem to justify both of Wright and Wolford's observations. Next, a brief examination of the structure of the Movimento Sem-Terra exposed the workings of gender equality, within the recognized inequalities of Brazilian society. By examining the realities of female participation and politicization in Palmares II, an MST settlement located in Parauapebas, in the Southeast of Pará State, we can challenge what appeared to be dichotomous discourses of Wright and Wolford, finding in these intersections a new dialogue of the landless movement: a female consciousness created within the political space of the MST.

There are a number of interesting reasons for studying in Palmares II. As a thirteen year old *assentamento*, Palmares II has been long removed from the political fervor of occupation. Thus, observing the politicization and participation of women in the settlement will challenge the observations made by the National Commission of Women of the MST in 1988 that there is a drastic drop in participation of women once *acampamento* life has ended. Furthermore, because Palmares II is well-established it will be a better representation of the landless movement's work. Over its thirteen year history, it is more likely that any political space which might be created through the guise of the MST will have had a chance to do so. Completing this study in a younger *assentamento* would restrict the amount of time the community has had to establish directives from the MST.

The objective of this study is to examine the political participation of women within a landless settlement of the MST. This main objective will seek to understand the realities of women's rights within the MST, and contribute to the discourses begun by other authors and researchers who have found both high levels of participation and pervasive machismo. The study will contribute not only to an on-the-ground understanding of current realities of gender in a landless settlement, but to the larger dialogue of MST consciousness—to the ideologies and political space constructed by the Movimento Sem-Terra. This main objective can be broken down in to the following themes:

- How women are involved with the landless movement in Palmares II
- What motivates and enables this politicization

- How involved women perceive their lives to have changed with the MST
- Opinions on gender relations and roles in the landless movement
- What obstacles keep women from being more involved
- Why some women choose not to be involved with the MST
- What would have to change for the uninvolved to become more involved

By combining the results of these observations with a second analysis of MST gender objectives—both from published literature on their website and through interviews with regional coordinating offices—the study will create a current reality of feminine participation and the MST’s role in influencing this.

### **III. Methods**

To achieve the goals of this study in Palmares II, observations and semi-structured interviews will be made on the following levels and with a number of objectives in mind.

- *Actively involved women of the MST*: how life has changed since moving to Palmares II, reasons for involvement, kinds of participation with the MST, challenges faced as a politically active woman, opinions on why other women are not more politically involved, obstacles influencing participation, how the role of men and women is different in the MST, expectations and hopes for the future, influence of education on politicization, pressures involvement creates on daily activities.
- *Women not involved with the MST*: how life has changed since moving to Palmares II, reasons for not being involved, opinions on the MST, obstacles women face in the community, how the role of men and women is different in the MST, expectations and hopes for the future, influence of education on politicization, pressures involvement would create on daily activities.
- *Participatory Observation*: casual conversations with a variety of community members about their perceptions of gender issues, community meetings, speaking with women leaders in the community for direction.
- *Marabá Regional Office*: how the MST works with women’s issues and participation, why the gender committee was formed and what is its purpose, obstacles women face in becoming more politically involved, how the role of men and women is different in the MST, any circumstances that might make Palmares II and Pará different from the rest of Brazil.

A key female leader in Palmares II will provide me with the names of women for the interviews.

Interviews will be focused on quality rather than quantity, as they will not be gathering statistical information. From all of these avenues, the study will seek to gain insights into the role of women in an MST settlement, how the MST enables their participation, and what challenges remain.

#### **IV. Study Site**

This study was carried out in the Assentamento Palmares II, an MST community located in the Southeast of Pará State. Palmares II was occupied in 1994, celebrating its thirteenth year in May 2007. It has grown to a population of over 6,000 people. Most of the men who settled Palmares II were garimpeiros (gold prospectors and miners) before joining the MST, and almost all of the settlers of the community came from peasant backgrounds in rural Maranhão.<sup>30</sup> The Movimento Sem-Terra began working in the Amazon in 1989, only taking hold in the mid-1990s, making Palmares II one of the oldest settlements of the region. It is under the direction of the regional office located in Marabá, Pará.

#### **V. Possible Study Bias**

There are a number of limitations on this study which should be taken into consideration before the results are analyzed. First and foremost, interviewees were identified by prominent leaders of the MST in Palmares II. Thus, those who were identified as “involved” women of the MST may have been selected based on a number of partialities, including allegiance to the MST, level of involvement, opinions on the MST, length of involvement, relations to the informant. At the same time, those who were identified as “not involved” may also have been subject to conscious or unconscious selection by the informers, including allegiance to the MST despite their lack of involvement, interest in being involved, reasons why these particular women were not involved, family history of involvement, and their opinions on the MST. As a result, interviewees may have had partial opinions lending a particular outlook on the situation of women’s participation in the landless movement. Furthermore, as research time was limited, the following results are based off of interviews with only eight women in Palmares II. Thus, it may be that were a different eight women selected, observations could be significantly different. Limitations in Portuguese prevented full communication between the interviewer and interviewees. Lack of knowledge of the community also meant that a young relation of the key MST informer was present at all interviews to make introductions and facilitate the meeting. Consequently, women may have felt pressured to

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<sup>30</sup> Wright and Wolford, 233.

respond in certain ways in front of someone related to the MST leader. Despite these limits, the study seeks to present a well-rounded qualitative discussion of female participation in Palmares II.

## **VI. Results (Refer to Table A on page 22)**

### **1. Female Politicization in Palmares II**

Upon completion of research in Palmares II, several themes have been discerned which guide us towards the objectives of this particular study. Four women who were considered “involved” with the MST by the female leader and four who were “not involved” were interviewed. Originally, the goal was to also interview women who had previous involvement with the landless movement, but no longer worked with the MST. However, upon arrival in Palmares II, women leaders suggested that it is very vague to try to make a distinction between those who currently participate and those who no longer participate. Furthermore, identifying women as “no longer involved” according to the leaders might dismay them because they still consider themselves involved.

The discussion can be broken down into the following categories: how women are involved with the MST, obstacles women face in becoming politically involved, opinions on the difference between men’s and women’s participation, what they see as the role of the landless movement in helping female politicization, and personal stories and experiences with MST involvement. By comparing responses from those who work with the MST and those who are not involved, we will create a well-rounded perspective on current realities of gender issues in the MST.

In response to the question of why some women in Palmares II choose not to be involved with the MST, there was a distinction between the answers of those who are involved and those who do not work with the landless movement. Involved women suggested for the most part that the lack of participation by other women was for the most part a result of personal ideology and belief. One woman suggested that either the uninvolved had not spent enough time in Palmares II to understand the MST or they simply preferred a more “normal life” free from the strains of political involvement.<sup>31</sup> Another two both suggested it was a matter of belief. Only one woman of the four involved interviewees recognized that in addition to this matter of belief, there are other “domestic” issues which influence the involvement of women with the MST. She spoke of obligations in the household—making food for their husbands, taking care of their children—which inhibit other

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<sup>31</sup> Interview, 14 May 2007, Palmares II.

women from being able to take on involvement with the MST.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, none of the interviewed women who were not involved with the MST mentioned ideology or belief. For all four, it was a matter of not having enough time. One woman remarked, “We have to work so we won’t be broke. We don’t have time to live politically.”<sup>33</sup> All four mentioned taking care of their children, cooking, the many responsibilities that keep them tied to their houses as reasons why they did not work with the landless movement.<sup>34</sup> This is an interesting dichotomy between the women involved and those not involved. The involved women all felt it was more a matter of belief, of personal choice than anything else. This suggests that they perceived the political world to be open to all who wish to be involved. The lack of much recognition on the part of the involved women about obligations and responsibilities also implies that they see these domestic duties to be less inhibiting than the women who said they could not find time to be involved because of all of their work at home. It may also suggest a lack of awareness on the part of the involved women about what keeps other women from being involved. However, results from further questions reveal a greater awareness of these obstacles by the involved women than this first question permitted.

When asked exactly what obstacles keep women from becoming more politically involved, instead of simply why some women do not work with the MST, all eight women had very similar answers. The responses on behalf of the involved women, recognizing what might keep other women from being involved, suggest that there is not as great a disconnect between involved and uninvolved women as responses to the first question implied. All of the women agreed that family obligations keep a woman in her house, making political involvement difficult. One involved woman struck on all of the domestic obligations that other women spoke of. She commented, “There are various difficulties for a woman. She has her family, work, kids, the house. She’s very busy, plus she may be studying. It’s hard to do other things. However, staying only in the house is terrible, and so many women choose to take on work with the MST. They like being so involved.”<sup>35</sup> The optimism in her statement, besides being indicative of her own involvement, also speaks to the ideologies of the MST’s gender committee that we will discuss later. Another involved woman connected the obstacles women face in MST settlements to the Brazilian society as a whole—that same “machismo” that Wright and Wolford recognized in *Palmares II*. She remarked that because the MST cannot be separated entirely from Brazilian society, it is subject to the same discrimination.<sup>36</sup> While the involved women’s answers all had a certain level of optimism—expressing that involvement helps women get out of the house, the uninvolved women did not have

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<sup>32</sup> Interview, 15 May 2007, *Palmares II*.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, 16 May 2007, *Palmares II*.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews, 16 and 17 May 2007, *Palmares II*.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, 14 May 2007, *Palmares II*.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, 15 May 2007, *Palmares II*.

similar optimism. One woman continued to remark how sad it was to her that she could not be involved, that there were other women like her who did not have opportunities to leave the house.<sup>37</sup>

All women agreed that there was no difference in men's and women's involvement with the MST. They remarked that participation was completely equal. That in all the spaces men work, women were found working, too. One of the uninvolved women did remark that though participation was equal, women often have to make decisions based on their entire families. While churches are open to entire families, she recalled that many MST activities do not welcome whole families, inhibiting women from leaving the house.<sup>38</sup> One uninvolved woman agreed that participation was equal for the most part, but that her husband has less responsibility in the house. She recalled, "My husband leaves early in the morning and does not come back until the night. He can come and go as he pleases. It's really sad for me."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, she felt that the women who play active roles in the MST have fewer obligations to be in their house; they have someone else who can take care of the cooking and children. The woman remarked, "I don't have anyone else to take care of my house. I have to take care of my work here. Life is more comfortable for them (the involved women)."<sup>40</sup> Another woman agreed with this statement, suggesting that though men and women share roles in the landless movement, men are excluded from the world of the mother and do not have similar family obligations. She commented that many women, therefore, prefer to remain tranquil in the house with their families.<sup>41</sup>

When asked how the Movimento Sem-Terra works with this issue of female participation, again there was a split between the answers of those who have already found ways to be involved and those who have not. The involved women spoke of how the MST organizes militancy in the community—coordinating meetings, working with politicians in the "outside" government, setting up courses for youth and women. One woman in particular believed that the landless movement greatly facilitated women's participation. She saw this facilitation in the debates about female participation the MST organized for the community, in discussions about mobilization of women that helped the community learn that "we (women) are important in this fight, too, in the country and the city."<sup>42</sup> She seemed to discount the remarks of the uninvolved women who said family obligations kept them from involvement by saying that there are women in Palmares II with very big families who participate in every activity. She seemed dismayed by women who said they were "too busy" to participate. Proudly, the respondent announced that out of four coordinators for

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<sup>37</sup> Interview, 16 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, 17 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, 16 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, 16 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, 16 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, 17 May 2007, Palmares II.

education at the school, only one was a man. She believed that women were involved along every step of the way. Another involved woman remarked that the MST helps “construct the participation” of women by always questioning gender issues, by encouraging more female involvement.<sup>43</sup>

Uninvolved women had an interesting take on how the MST works with women’s issues. To start, all four women had high opinions of the Movimento Sem-Terra. They believed that involvement was “very important” because it helps people find a better life. One woman remarked that political involvement is essential to help change the mentality of Brazil, to get more and more people politically involved.<sup>44</sup> Another pledged her allegiance with the MST, commenting that political involvement with the MST—with such a significant social movement—is important because “we don’t like outside politics; they don’t help us at all.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, when asked how the landless movement works with the participation of women and what would have to change for them to become involved, none of the uninvolved women expressed as much enthusiasm as the involved women had. Compared to the positive opinions they had for the MST as an organization, their responses to these questions were less optimistic. One woman referred to education to compare the distinction between being involved or not with the MST. She said, “Either a woman can study or she can be in her house. But she can’t do both. It’s very sad.”<sup>46</sup> The same woman felt that the MST was not doing enough to support family participation. She thought that if the MST created projects that whole families could be involved with, then she would be able to participate. The respondent said that, as a mother, she does not have the flexibility to do different things every day. She would like to be more involved, and she could be if the MST would organize more movements within the community, for the people that do not have the luxury to leave. She commented, “There aren’t many opportunities here for me, for mothers. It’s really difficult. Everyone here has problems, and I’d like to have the best life possible, but this is really hard!”<sup>47</sup>

Women had a variety of objectives for the future for other women in Palmares II. The four involved women shared many hopes and saw many positive impacts with female participation. One woman replied, “I think it is beautiful, the work of women with the poor and with this community. I want to help this. Brazil needs this, because it’s good that women don’t only sit in their houses.”<sup>48</sup> Another agreed with the importance of providing women an escape from their domestic duties. She hoped of women’s futures that “they discover that life is more than domestic housework. It’s

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<sup>43</sup> Interview, 17 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, 16 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>45</sup> Interview, 17 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, 16 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, 16 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>48</sup> Interview, 14 May 2007, Palmares II.



bigger than the kitchen. There is another world out there, other conceptions, and this world, too, has respect for women.”<sup>49</sup> The other two involved women spoke more of their concrete objectives for ways to get women involved. They remarked that the MST is helping to organize the work of women with different production and artisan projects. Through cooperatives and markets the MST has already been helping to organize this production by women, and one of the respondents said that this was important because “we understand that women need money to survive, to live, to participate.”<sup>50</sup> The same woman saw the importance of participation on any level. Any way that women could get out of the house was significant. She recalled a group of only married women who had formed their own dance troupe and begun to take part in theater and other courses. In all of these responses, there was the hope that women can find a way to liberate themselves. The uninvolved women shared these goals for women, and especially themselves, to become more involved in the future. None of the four uninvolved women elaborated on their responses more than that they would like to see greater levels of involvement.

Looking at the personal stories the eight women shared about their lives in Palmares II provides some of the most important information in this study of seeing the realities of feminine politicization in an MST settlement. In all of the responses there was a deep respect maintained for the movement and the way it had changed the women’s lives. One of the uninvolved women who had lived in Palmares II for seven years said that since moving here, she has become motivated to study so many things and believes that things will continue to get better in the future.<sup>51</sup> A woman who had been involved with the MST for all thirteen years of the settlement agreed with this sense of learning bestowed by the landless movement. She recalled of her experiences:

I didn’t get to go to school when I was younger, but with the MST I have learned so much. I do not know everything, but I know much more. For me, involvement with the MST is like an open book. It has created this community here. Without the MST, none of the conversations that happen here every day would exist.<sup>52</sup>

An interest in this idea of community and conversation completely enabled by the work of the landless movement was shared by many of the respondents. Another involved woman who had lived in Palmares II for eight years recalled the drastic ways in which her life had changed since arriving. She eagerly expressed, “Here I contribute to my community. Before, I contributed to nothing. It’s so significant, the work here. We have so many objectives.”<sup>53</sup> A third involved woman remembered how her involvement with the MST had made a prophecy of her grandfather’s come true. She recollected, “When I was younger, my grandfather told me that the time would

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<sup>49</sup> Interview, 15 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, 15 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, 17 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>52</sup> Interview, 13 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>53</sup> Interview, 14 May 2007, Palmares II.

come for agrarian reform, and well, that time is today, with the Movimento Sem-Terra.”<sup>54</sup> The fourth involved woman described how in her last six years working with the MST, she has become involved in politics, education, meetings, campaigns, and mobilization—all motivated by her experience becoming a mother.

## 2. The Discourse of the Movimento Sem-Terra: Marabá Regional Office

With the recollections and experiences of the eight Palmares II women in mind, we can take our discourse of feminine politicization to the regional, directive level. By comparing how these dialogues interact, we will gain insight into current realities of feminine politicization and see just how the landless movement is creating a space for female consciousness. Again, the responses of the Marabá office can be broken down into how the MST works with the participation of women, how the participation of men and women differs, what the MST sees as any differences in the ideologies of involved men and women, objectives for the future, functions of the gender committee, and how the situation in Pará might compare to the rest of Brazil.

When asked how exactly the MST works with the issue of women’s participation, a female spokesperson (who works particularly with women’s issues) for the regional office replied, “The MST has created a physical space for political involvement and it helps women enter this space to get to what is at the heart of the social movement.”<sup>55</sup> She then referred to the gender equality in the coordination of the landless movement, suggesting that this has helped to evolve the participation of women in both *acampamentos* and *assentamentos*.

Just as one of the involved women in Palmares II referred to the way the MST is part of its greater Brazilian society, so too did this spokesperson connect difficulties in the MST to the larger society. When asked how the participation of men and women differ in the landless movement, she saw less equality than the eight women in Palmares II—all of whom suggested that participation was exactly equal. The MST leader responded:

There are some difficulties with the participation of women in Brazil. The woman is expected to be in the house, to cook, to take care of the kids. Before anyone is a member of the Movimento Sem-Terra, they are a member of Brazilian society. We make up part of this history before we make up our own social movement. Everything isn’t equal. So we have been working to create a consciousness of equal participation. It is a work we are constantly doing. Consciousnesses are not that easy to change.<sup>56</sup>

Her response indicates the serious extent to which the landless movement has been working to

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<sup>54</sup> Interview, 13 May 2007, Palmares II.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, 21 May 2007, Marabá.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

change this Brazilian consciousness of inequality. Because, as she recognizes, the MST is part of the “history” of inequalities in Brazil, the work of the MST reaches far beyond agronomy and land reform to a society wide social movement—the same social movement mentioned by one of the involved women in *Palmares II*.<sup>57</sup>

The spokesperson then mentioned some of the ways in which men’s and women’s participation actually differs and the objectives that remain with the landless movement. She noted that while many women participate, they are most involved in health and education, while excluded from agronomy—which has been dominated by men. She saw that this division has “already been constructed in Brazilian society, and so [the MST’s] position is to right this inequality.” She saw literacy as another problem influencing the equal participation of men and women. She said the MST’s goal is for everyone to go to school, to have a chance to attend a university. Furthermore, the MST leader recognized many of the obstacles to participation that the uninvolved women mentioned, and responded with ways that the MST is working through these challenges. The theme of the woman being tied to the house emerged in her response, the same theme expressed by the uninvolved women in *Palmares II*:

Women are mothers, they are in charge of their kids. They are always inside the settlements, and so they miss most activities because they have to be inside the house—to cook, to get kids ready for school. We are trying to organize events to get more diverse participation. And so today, women are participating a little more, bringing their kids with them if they have to. But it is a debate that needs to be continued. A woman needs to gain the right to work, to speak, to participate.<sup>58</sup>

Just as one of the uninvolved women mourned the fact that she had to always stay in her house, that domestic responsibilities kept her from participating, so has the MST, at least ideologically, responded to the situation. As the spokesperson said, “we will need a lot of time to change consciousnesses”, to make the ideological changes into realities within the settlements. Author Marta Harnecker observed this similar changing ideology in the MST. She recalled, “Women have slowly come into leading roles in different spheres without sacrificing their families. In camps and settlements, courses and meetings, conditions have been created so that the mothers can participate while their children are attended to. No solution has yet been found, however, for married women with children who occupy leading roles.”<sup>59</sup> In this observation, both the voice of the dismayed uninvolved woman in *Palmares II*, the optimistic involved woman, and the MST coordinator can be found. In the intersection of these three voices (the one that needs change, the one that sees change happening, and the one that helps to coordinate this change) the reality of the MST’s work with

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<sup>57</sup> Interview, 14 May 2007, *Palmares II*.

<sup>58</sup> Interview, 21 May 2007, Marabá.

<sup>59</sup> Marta Harnecker, *Landless People: Building a Social Movement*, (Brazil: 2003), 19.

female participation can be realized. Each change begins from this first voice of the woman that is hindered by something in her community. It moves to the woman who has found enough support in that same community to overcome similar obstacles to the first woman, and it makes its way to the coordinators of the MST, to the regional and nationwide leaders that speak for the unspoken, and help to shape this space so that women can find positive changes within their communities.

Through these dialogues, the woman is slowly gaining the “right to work, to speak, to participate.”

The next question for the MST coordinator attempted to understand if differences existed in the ideologies men and women possessed in approaching their work with the landless movement. Her response once again unified the *social* goals of the MST. She replied, “Ideology for us is a project for life. It is a social project. It’s about land, school, health—projects for everyone to find a better life. And so these are common ideologies. Of course some men are more macho, some women more feminist—there is every possibility in between—but we still have common goals.”<sup>60</sup> To continue to achieve these common goals in the future she first jokingly replied that she hoped women would take over the world, but then returned to seriousness and said that she hoped women would find a way to take control of their own lives so that they would have the possibility to achieve and better themselves.

As an example of the success she sees the MST having in this fight for women’s participation, she referred to the gender committee. In each community, she remarked, the gender committee exists to debate questions about the woman, to strengthen current debates. The gender committee not only organizes women in this debate, but gives men a space to express their own interest in female participation. This suggests that within the MST’s goals of “cultural revolution,” they have created a space not only for women, but just as importantly, for men to participate in issues of women’s participation. Both community leaders in Palmares II and the regional leader stressed the need for the fight to be by both men and women. Segregating the debate would be to continue the segregation that already exists in the domestic household. Finally, the MST spokesperson returned to the idea of the landless movement as a social movement, and the ways in which this fight for women fit well into these greater debates about Brazilian society. She said, “This is a social fight, not just a fight for land. These problems are in all states in Brazil. This question about women’s participation is a fundamental debate in our social fight.”<sup>61</sup>

### **3. The Movimento Sem-Terra: A caldron for feminine militancy**

We began this study with the history of women’s rights in the landless movement and an

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<sup>60</sup> Interview, 21 May 2007, Marabá.

<sup>61</sup> Interview, 21 May 2007, Marabá.

interest in understanding the realities of feminine politicization at the community level. Interviews from women in Palmares II and with the regional office in Marabá revealed diverse, yet intersecting discourses about female militancy within the MST. There was optimism in the ways women are taking on a variety of leadership roles in Palmares II while there was disappointment on behalf of some women that they felt tied to their domestic obligations. The involved women recalled the many positive ways in which the MST has changed their lives and the uninvolved women expressed a genuine interest in finding similar levels of political activism. While the involved women seemed to find ideology and belief to be important factors in why women choose to be involved with the MST they also understood the inhibiting domestic obligations plaguing many women who wanted to be involved.

Questions about the importance of women's participation and how it fits into the ideologies of the Movimento Sem-Terra revealed particularly supporting discourses between all three groups interviewed. At the very foundational level of the landless movement—the individual opinions of community members—there was a sense in both involved and uninvolved women that political participation was significant because it allowed women to get out of the house, to enter debates at levels larger than their kitchens, to view the woman as an important voice in agrarian reform, in their communities, and in society as a whole. All responses pointed to the landless movement as more than agrarian reform—as a space for social revolution in which old machismo traditions could be broken down, creating a new female consciousness. The spokesperson for coordinators of the MST working at regional levels agreed that as a social movement, the MST is enabling a space for women to seek out their own liberation, to construct a new consciousness wherein lives led outside of the kitchen are also deserving of respect. While there is this optimism for a new ideology of women, all discourses maintained that this is a long and challenging fight because it is not just working within the progressive boundaries of the landless movement, but against the machismo traditions of Brazilian society; while much progress has already been made, women (like the dismayed, uninvolved women in Palmares II) continue to be hindered by these societal constructs. However, the optimism of the involved women and their belief that really any woman could participate in the MST if she chose to, suggests that this progress may be picking up, that the space may really be opening for women to leave the house.

Current literature on the MST's website reveals progress in the way the regional and directive discourses are lining up with the discourses of the uninvolved women at the community level. Among other goals, the MST now considers it “essential” to “guarantee childcare at courses, events, meetings in national, state, regional and local instances; permanent child care in the camps and settlements so children are not impediments of women's participation in activities of education

and in daily work,” to have “50% of men and women in all activities of education and training,” and to “conduct intensive education regarding the theme of gender in all sectors and instances.”<sup>62</sup>

Furthermore, the Movimento Sem-Terra relates these community level goals to its greater ideology of cultural revolution. The MST writes that without these changes in the role and value of women in the landless movement, “we will have in our homes, communities of camps and settlements and in the body of the organization, values such as exploitation, discrimination, violence, authoritarianism and individualism, pillars of the society we are trying to destroy.”<sup>63</sup> This signifies the ability of the landless movement to create a space for *ideological* changes of consciousness—changes to work away at the “pillars” of Brazilian machismo society—and not just create directives for objective changes.

One involved woman in Palmares II spoke of her community as a caldron of militancy, and her image transfers nicely to how women’s involvement is developing with the MST. She saw militancy starting here, at its most foundational levels, and as people left and migrated the militancy followed them, spreading to new places. To her, this space for militancy was always in flux, always coming and going, reaching new areas, retreating, and then setting off again.<sup>64</sup> In the same way, these changes in feminine consciousness, in women’s ideologies have begun at the lowest neighborhood level, have reached out to regional and national levels of MST coordination and are currently in a state of growing flux. As neighborhood ideologies change to open spaces for women, constructs at the community level are challenged. With each challenge, new discourses intersect and more people begin to consider this new consciousness. And so, as the caldron of militancy slowly spreads its way from the center of Palmares II to regional and national levels, so too is this feminine consciousness beginning to push against the walls of Brazilian machismo tradition, enabling the landless movement to continue its social fight as much as the landless movement has enabled this space for changing consciousnesses. Together, these discourses are challenging each other and enabling the *construction* found at the heart of the Movimento Sem-Terra’s philosophy.

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<sup>62</sup> Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra, <http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=gendersector>, viewed 28 May 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Interview, 14 May 2007, Marabá.

**Table A: Summary of Questions and Responses of Women in Palmares II**

<b>MST Involved Women in Palmares II</b>	<b>Uninvolved Women in Palmares II</b>
<p><i>Reasons why some women do not work with the MST:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-she does not believe in the MST</li> <li>-she has only spent a little time here, so she does not understand the MST</li> <li>-she prefers a more normal life</li> <li>-she has a lot of household work</li> <li>-she has to take care of her family</li> </ul>	<p><i>Reasons why these women do not work with the MST:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-she has kids, her house, her studies, many things to take care of</li> <li>-she does not have time to be involved because of her domestic and family obligations, she cannot sacrifice her work</li> </ul>
<p><i>What obstacles keep women from being more politically involved:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-her family, her work, her home</li> <li>-the discriminatory Brazilian society, machismo</li> </ul>	<p><i>What obstacles keep women from being more politically involved:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-her family, her house</li> <li>-lack of family projects for the MST</li> <li>-domestic obligations</li> </ul>
<p><i>How does the participation of men and women differ with the MST?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-completely equal</li> <li>-shared participation, no difference</li> <li>-both work with production, education, and health</li> <li>-all spaces are open for women</li> </ul>	<p><i>How does the participation of men and women differ with the MST?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-men have more opportunities to leave the house, but involved women do the same things</li> <li>-shared roles, although the men are excluded from family obligations</li> <li>-equal, they do the same things</li> </ul>
<p><i>Opinions on the MST and its work with women:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-the MST helps women gain freedom from their domestic obligations</li> <li>-the MST is helping to get women more involved in politics and the community</li> <li>-helping women realize that they can be respected in a world outside of their kitchen</li> <li>-the MST organizes this militancy, provides a space for women to be involved</li> <li>-the MST helps organize this fight for women outside of settlements, with the government, with greater society</li> <li>-the MST is helping communities value women</li> </ul>	<p><i>Opinions on the MST and its work with women:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-the MST changes many people, it helps people find better lives</li> <li>-it is very important to be involved</li> <li>-the MST can help change mentalities in Brazil</li> <li>-outside politics do not help us, so the MST is essential</li> <li>-women can be involved if they have others to take care of their domestic duties, but some of us don't have anyone else</li> <li>-the MST needs to make projects that are more family oriented so women can leave their houses and bring their kids</li> </ul>

## **Appendix A: Interview Questions for *Involved* Women with the MST**

1. Quantos anos você morava aqui, no Palmares II?  
How many years have you lived in Palmares II?
2. Por que você se mudou aqui?  
Why did you move here?
3. Desde se mudava a Palmares II, como estava sua vida mudando?  
Since moving to Palmares II, how has your life changed?
4. Quanto tempo você trabalha com MST?  
How long have you worked with the MST?
5. Que você faz com MST?  
What do you do with the MST?
6. Por que algumas mulheres no Palmares II não trabalham com MST?  
Why do some women in Palmares II not work with MST?
7. Como é a participação das mulheres diferente do que a participação dos homens?  
How is the participation of women different from the participation of men?
8. Tem obstáculos pelas mulheres quando elas querem ficar mais envolvidas politicamente?  
Are there obstacles for women when they want to become more politically involved?
9. Pensa que o nível da educação tem influencia pro envolvimento das mulheres?  
Do you think education levels influence the involvement of women?
10. Quais objetivos você tem para mulheres no futuro em Palmares II?  
What objectives do you have for women in the future of Palmares II?
11. Como MST ajuda o envolvimento das mulheres?  
How does the MST help the involvement of women?



## **Appendix B: Interview Questions for *Uninvolved* Women with the MST**

1. Quantos anos você morava aqui, no Palmares II?  
How many years have you lived in Palmares II?
2. Por que você se mudou aqui?  
Why did you move here?
3. Desde se mudava a Palmares II, como estava sua vida mudando?  
Since moving to Palmares II, how has your life changed?
4. Por que você não está envolvido com MST e políticos em Palmares II?  
Why aren't you involved with the MST and politics in Palmares II?
5. Que você pensa do MST e envolvimento político?  
What do you think of the MST and political involvement?
6. Por que algumas mulheres no Palmares II trabalham com MST e outras não trabalham?  
Why do some women in Palmares II work with the MST and others not work?
7. Como é a participação das mulheres diferente do que a participação dos homens?  
How is the participation of women different from the participation of men?
8. Tem obstáculos pelas mulheres quando elas querem ficar mais envolvidas politicamente?  
Are there obstacles for women when they want to become more politically involved?
9. Pensa que o nível da educação tem influencia pro envolvimento das mulheres?  
Do you think education levels influence the involvement of women?
10. Quais objetivos você tem para mulheres no futuro em Palmares II?  
What objectives do you have for women in the future of Palmares II?
11. Como MST ajuda o envolvimento das mulheres?  
How does the MST help the involvement of women?
12. Que precisaria mudar antes de você ficara mais envolvido com MST e políticos em Palmares II?  
What would need to change for you to become more involved with MST and politics in Palmares II?

## **Appendix C: Interview Questions for MST regional office in Marabá**

1. Como MST trabalha com a participação das mulheres?  
How does the MST work with the participation of women?
2. Como é a participação das mulheres diferente do que a participação dos homens no MST?  
How does the participation of men and women differ in the MST?
3. Você pensa que as mulheres do MST têm ideologias diferentes do que os homens?  
Do you think that women of the MST have different ideologies than men of the MST?
4. Tem obstáculos para mulheres quando elas querem ficar mais envolvidas com políticos?  
Are there obstacles for women when they want to be more politically involved?
5. Por que algumas mulheres não trabalham com MST?  
Why do some women in MST settlements not work with the MST?
6. Quais objetivos você tem para a participação das mulheres no futuro?  
What objectives do you have for the participation of women in the future?
7. Qual são as funções do comitê do gênero?  
What are the functions of the gender committee?
8. Pensa que o trabalho desse comitê tem importância para a participação das mulheres?  
Do you think the work of the gender committee influences the participation of women?
9. Pensa que a participação das mulheres tem importância para o movimento dos trabalhadores rurais?  
Do you think the participation of women has importance for the MST?
10. Como esses problemas de participação das mulheres aqui no Pará comparam com todo de Brasil?  
How do these problems of the participation of women in Pará compare to the rest of Brazil?

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