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The Erasmus logo is a stylized, handwritten-style script of the word "Erasmus" in a dark blue or black color.

**Embroidering Resistance: Daily Struggles of Women  
Affected by the Baixo Iguaçu Hydropower Dam in  
Paraná, South Brazil**

A Research Paper presented by:

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## List of Acronyms

FPE	Feminist Political Ecology
ISS	International Institute of Social Studies
LVC	La Via Campesina
MAB	<i>Movimento de Atingidos por Barragens</i> (Movement of People Affected by Dams)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PAC	<i>Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento</i> (Growth Acceleration Programme)
PT	<i>Partido dos Trabalhadores</i> (Worker's Party)
RIMA	<i>Relatório de Impacto Ambiental</i> (Environmental Impact Report)

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## **Abstract**

Based on a research journey in collaboration with a Brazilian social movement, the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), this Research Paper explores the experiences of resistance of women whose lives were flooded by the Baixo Iguaçu Hydropower Dam in Paraná, South Brazil. Dominant development narratives promote hydropower dams as a sustainable source of energy in Brazil, while silencing the voices of those inhabiting the affected lands, and underestimating the social and ecological destruction that large dam projects provoke. Drawing from feminist political ecology, decolonial theory and Latin American political ecology, this research examines how women in Baixo Iguaçu who were affected by the construction of a dam on their rural lands embroider their embodied, emotional and daily resistance. Guided by ‘arpilleras’ – embroideries that women organized in the MAB create to narrate their silenced stories – and drawing from conversations and in-depth interviews, this research brings their voices to the centre. Collectively, women in the MAB apply the language of arpilleras to a popular education feminist methodology, transforming sewing into politics. In Baixo Iguaçu, women affected by the dam struggle daily against displacement, the flooding of their territories, the destruction of their communities and care networks, the violent stigmatization of their political engagement, and their exclusion from spaces of negotiation and decision-making, among others. I suggest that arpilleras are an alternative language through which women express their knowledges, emotions and experiences otherwise. Arpilleras grow into a political strategy that uses art: a strategy for widening women’s political participation, for creating collective identity, and for building counter-hegemonic narratives. These narratives rise up to challenge the dominant energy development model that transforms women’s rivers and bodies into commodities.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Large dams for hydropower generation, historically promoted as drivers of growth and progress around the world, are increasingly being fostered also as sustainable sources of energy. By bringing the voices of people affected by a dam in South Brazil, this research examines the discourse of dams as sustainable development from a critical perspective, contributing to discussions on how hydropower development is experienced and resisted locally. The relevance of this research lies in challenging the narratives of the hydropower development model, highlighting how this model produces multiple forms of violence and oppression, and how it is being contested. In particular, this research aims to contribute by drawing attention to the creative resistance of women in the Movement of People Affected by Dams, who through an alternative language are telling their silenced stories, building counter-hegemonic narratives and promoting transformations.

## **Keywords**

Dams, women, MAB, Baixo Iguaçu, Brazil, resistance, arpilleras, embroidery, hydropower development

# Chapter 1 | Introduction

## 1.1 What is this Research About?

Situated within the perspective of critical development studies and emerging from my interest and engagement as a Latin American (Argentinian and Brazilian) feminist, this Re-search Paper (RP) explores the embodied, everyday experiences of resistances of women affected by one of the many hydropower dams in South Brazil. Driven by my initial curiosity about the use of *arpilleras* by women affected by dams in Brazil as a tool of resistance, I embarked on a research journey that traversed different scales of a social movement and took me to a region in Paraná (South Brazil), known as Baixo Iguaçu, which was affected by the construction of the sixth dam in the Iguaçu River.

The arpillera is a textile art technique that originated in Chile and can be described as a three-dimensional appliquéd tapestry. Used by Chilean collectives of women to denounce the abuses and violence of Pinochet dictatorship, arpilleras became a political tool, a means of resistance. Arpilleras travelled to Brazil and were adopted by the national collective of women of a Brazilian mixed-gender social movement, the *Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens* (MAB) – Movement of People Affected by Dams. Since 2013, groups of women that form part of the MAB in different regions of Brazil have been using arpilleras as a political tool to narrate their experiences and make political statements.

These textile narratives were my entry point into the stories of resistance of women affected by a dam in South Brazil. Engaging with the MAB, I embarked on a collaborative research journey. The movement opened windows for me to get closer to its complex, diverse and multiscale social justice struggle over dams and over the energy development model implemented in Brazil. A series of encounters, initially virtual and subsequently on-site, permitted the construction of this research.

Large-scale dam building for the generation of hydroelectric power is a principal part of Brazil's energy development model (Klein 2015). This model is sustained by hegemonic discourses of progress, growth and sustainable development that have frequently ignored and silenced the knowledge, voices and experiences of those populations that inhabit the lands flooded by artificial lakes for the generation of energy. This energy development strategy can be situated within the dynamics of extractivism that systematically uproot people from their territories, destroying lives, cultures and histories.

The research is guided by the arpilleras through which the voices of women affected by dams resisting in different parts of Brazil have initially reached me. I will discuss the idea that arpillera is a language; a counter-hegemonic language that women are using to tell their silenced stories. The focus is on the embodied experiences of daily resistance of women affected by a dam in the region of Baixo Iguaçu, and the meanings, roles and transformative potentials of arpilleras for their resistance.

The theoretical framework I construct for the research incorporates elements from a variety of proposals, mainly those of *feminist political ecology* (FPE) (Elmhirst 2015; Harcourt and Nelson 2015; Harris 2015; Resurrección 2017; Sultana 2015; Wichterich 2015), *Latin American political ecology* (Acosta 2012; Alimonda 2011; Duarte et al 2015; Escobar 2008; Svampa 2008; 2013; Zhouri 2015), and *decolonial thought* (Escobar 2015; Espinosa et al 2013; Icaza 2018; Segato 2016; 2018; Walsh 2017). Drawing from an eclectic body of work, I explore in this paper how women affected by a hydropower dam embroider their embodied, emotional and daily resistance.



The main research question I pose is: *how do women affected by the Hydropower Dam Baixo Iguaçu experience and resist daily the dominant discourses and practices of hydropower development in Brazil?* To explore this question, I develop a series of discussions: First, I discuss the discourses and practices of hydropower development that became hegemonic in Brazil and sustain the continuous damming of rivers, leading to the construction of a sixth dam in the Iguaçu River. Second, I contextualize the local organized resistance of rural families that emerged in Baixo Iguaçu. Third, I investigate the meanings and potentials of *arpilleras* for women's resistances. Finally, I analyse the experiences of resistance of women affected by the sixth dam in the Iguaçu River.

The research aims to be a contribution to discussions on women's resistances to multiple forms of oppression in extractivist contexts and on the use of creative tools of resistance for promoting transformations. Furthermore, this research aims to contribute by bringing together diverse proposals that share a commitment with social justice as a theoretical framework for analysis.

The RP is divided into five chapters. In the following sections of this chapter, I present the methodological trajectory. The second chapter critically discusses the hydropower development discourse that is hegemonic in Brazil and how it relates to the construction of the Baixo Iguaçu Hydropower Dam. The third chapter presents the MAB and its organization of a local mobilization of small farmers affected by the dam in Baixo Iguaçu. In chapter four I delve into the resistances of women affected by the dam: I analyse the different meanings and roles of *arpilleras* as a political tool and its transformative potentials; then I investigate women's embodied, emotional daily experiences of resistance in Baixo Iguaçu. In the concluding chapter, I resume the analyses and present final reflections.

## 1.2 Methodology of the Research Journey

### *Origins of a Collaborative Research Process*

I started to think about researching the resistances of women affected by dams in Brazil and their use of *arpilleras* in January 2019, when working on an essay on the gendered impacts of the largest Brazilian hydropower dam project led me to a documentary released in 2017 entitled "Arpilleras: Women Affected by Dams Embroidering the Resistance"<sup>1</sup>, directed by the MAB's national collective of women<sup>2</sup>. As the film was then not available online, I sent a message to its Facebook page asking if it could be shared with me. Adriane Canan (filmmaker and activist involved in the collective direction of the film) responded sending me the film and opening a dialogue. After watching it I contacted her again, expressing my interest in engaging with the MAB for my master's research project. She put me in contact with a coordinator<sup>3</sup> of the MAB's national collective of women. Days later, my friend Isis, visiting Ph.D. researcher in ISS who is also an activist in Brazil, put me in contact with another MAB's national coordinator. This was the opening of a collaborative research process with a social movement.

Relying on 'snowballing', I contacted several MAB's coordinators and personally met one in Amsterdam to discuss the possibilities of doing my research with the movement. These conversations were helpful for focusing the topic of the research and increasing my knowledge of the MAB, and decisive for the selection of one of the several areas affected by dams in Brazil as the locus of my research. Locating my research in Baixo Iguaçu (Paraná,

<sup>1</sup> The documentary is now available in YouTube, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEu-AATb3TU>

<sup>2</sup> This is a collective integrated by female coordinators of the MAB.

<sup>3</sup> 'Coordinators' is the term the MAB uses to refer to those activists who have defined coordination roles at the different levels of the movement.

South Brazil) was a co-decision informed by the fact that I am from South Brazil and thus I am not as much of an outsider in a place affected by a dam there as I would be in other parts of the country. Also, this co-decision was informed by fact that, in the words of Rose, a national coordinator of the MAB, “it is important for us to bring visibility to cases that are less known and Baixo Iguaçu is a very truculent case that has been overlooked”<sup>4</sup>. Shortly after this co-decision, Rose put me in touch with coordinators of MAB Paran  s, with whom I arranged my visit.

### ***Feminist Methodological Approach***

My approach to knowledge production is informed by feminist epistemology (Harding 2005). I build this research from my partial, situated and embodied epistemological gaze, fed by my positionality, my experiences, and my political and ethical commitments (Haraway 1998). I depart from an understanding that my subjectivity cannot be erased from the knowledge production process I am traversing, given that I see “the world from specific locations, embodied and particular, and never innocent” (Rose 1997: 308). As Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 35) stated, “[k]nowledge is inevitably both ‘about somewhere’ and ‘from somewhere’, and [...] the knower’s location and life experience are somehow central to the kind of knowledge produced”. It is from my situated, partial and embodied perspective that I engage with women that daily resist an unjust energy development model that affects their embodied and situated experiences.

In order to answer the questions that guide my research, I embarked on a qualitative exploratory investigation inspired by ethnographic approaches that are attentive to location, lived experiences and everyday struggles (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Wolkord 2007; Sultana 2007; Lapegna 2011). I based my research on listening and learning from the people affected by dams and activist supporting them about their local lives and realities of everyday practices, bringing the situated and embodied experiences of women to the centre.

I tell this story with a constant effort to not romanticize their experiences or appropriate their knowledges, and I do not claim to ‘know’ or ‘see’ from their position (Haraway 1988: 584). Listening and learning across differences, I speak from my own situated perspective.

Since I started my dialogues with activists of the MAB, I have tried to create possibilities of thinking *with them*, and reflected on what that does to my research – to “think with others – with the activists of movements that produce their own knowledges, [...] with social movements in resistance”<sup>5</sup> (Escobar 2018: 9). According to Escobar, these movements are relevant spaces of knowledge production in which activists are creating diverse types of knowledge (Escobar 2008). From this perspective, I tried to build a research more *with* the MAB than *about* it, and I recognize the multiple limitations I faced for achieving this. Building a collaborative research process is a continuing effort against the reproduction of colonial dynamics in research practices (Espinosa 2014; Icaza 2018).

I position myself as a supporter of the struggle of the MAB, which involves contradictions but also interesting potentials. According to Hale (2006: 98):

“To align oneself with a political struggle while carrying out research on issues related to that struggle is to occupy a space of profoundly generative scholarly understanding. Yet when we position ourselves in such spaces, we are also inevitably drawn into the compromised conditions of the political process. The resulting contradictions make the research more

<sup>4</sup> Rose in personal interview, July 2019.

<sup>5</sup> I also use the term ‘local coordinators’ to refer to these activists who coordinate the movement in Paran  .

<sup>6</sup> My translation

difficult to carry out, but they also generate insight that otherwise would be impossible to achieve”.

### ***Positionality and Reflexivity***

The place from where I traverse this research journey is complex, marked by my political commitments as a supporter of the MAB and as a feminist, by my experiences and my privileges as an educated woman doing a master program in Europe, as part of the Brazilian urban upper-middle-class, and as a white person in a country so deeply marked by structural racism and social inequalities. My encounters with the members of the MAB, in its varied and complex internal relations and divisions were shaped by multiple power relations. Notably, urban-rural divisions and class and education differences shaped these relations. The fact that I am urban and educated (studying in Europe!) marked my location and how I was seen by the rural families, who would refer to me as “the one who studies”, “the one who knows”, and “the one who travels”. I tried to deal with this by positioning myself as someone that was there to *learn* with them.

Since the first virtual encounters I had with members of the MAB, I positioned myself as a supporter of their struggle and as someone who is adaptable to what the movement can and wants to share with an outsider, which I believe was important for building trust and opening up spaces. The way I was able to move between the levels of the movement – from national (MAB centralized in São Paulo), to regional (Paraná) and then to local (Baixo Iguaçu) – also marked my positionality. The families in Baixo Iguaçu welcomed me as someone that comes through the movement. On the one side, approaching the families through the movement helped me in building their trust. I perceived that people were more open to share their thoughts and experiences with me because my visit was arranged by activists that they knew for a long time and trusted. This does not mean that I was seen as a member of the movement; I was seen as an outsider, which offered insights that would have not been possible if I was seen as part of the MAB’s coordination. On the other hand, approaching the local struggle through the movement also meant that I was guided by a particular vision, and that my space as a researcher was conditioned by what the movement opened (or not) for me and with whom they connected me. I am aware of the fact that I only saw snapshots of a struggle that is fluid and complex, gaining a partial and limited view of the regional operation of a national social movement and the daily dynamics of resistances in one particular place affected by a dam.

A slogan used by the MAB - “we are all affected” - triggered reflections about my positionality. I find some contradictions in my engagement with women affected by dams and their struggles, because I am not a woman affected by a dam and I am in a very different position in relation to those who are. I am affected by the advancement of an energy model that demands continuous dam-building, a model that is embedded in the neoliberal capitalist development logic that produces multiple violences and is destroying our planet. At the same time, I am also deeply implicated in this model, through my “patterns of consumption and socio-economic privilege that are sustained by trends of exploitation of certain bodies and destitution of lands” (Icaza 2018: 68). My implication combines with my desire to support a social struggle against a hegemonic development model from which I have benefitted, generating what I find to be a contradiction. I try to deal with this contradiction (and others) by reflecting on how my positionality is “intertwined with the material inequalities and power structures that have marginalized others” (de Jong 2017: 191), generating challenges and tensions that affected the research process.

## ***Methods and Pathways***

I carried out research in Brazil between July and August 2019. Participant observation and informal conversations were central methods for collecting information, especially in Paraná where I was among members of the movement and constantly engaged in spontaneous conversations related to their resistances. In addition, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted, totalizing 31 people interviewed (see Appendix 1). I used a recording device during the interviews and some of the informal conversations, always with consent of the research participants. A fieldwork journal and a camera also accompanied me. In some of the interviews I used arpilleras as mediating devices for asking questions about the stories that they tell. Additionally, the MAB's promotional materials that emerged from the narratives of arpilleras, such as catalogues, press releases, the documentary, as well as internal materials like dossiers that the activists shared with me were important sources of data.

Along with the local coordinators it was decided that I would not to use the real names of the research participants, for protecting their identities and safety, especially in the face of the current political climate in Brazil, namely the backlash against social movements and constant criminalization of social struggles<sup>7</sup>. It is also important to mention that some of the MAB's coordinators I interviewed highlighted that having their names in the paper did not make sense for them because they were speaking in the name of the movement, as collective subjects. Throughout this paper, I use pseudonyms for referring to the research participants, with the exceptions of Esther Vital and Adriane Canan, two activist-artists who spoke to me as individuals and agreed to be named in this paper.

My research in Brazil started in Ubatuba, a small town in the coast of the state of São Paulo where I met Esther Vital, a textile art curator and researcher from Spain who coordinated the arpilleras-project of the MAB from its inception until recently, when she took a step back from the MAB to work on her own project, a short animation film that uses the language of arpilleras. This two-days encounter involved conversations about arpilleras as a political tool, an interview, and the embroidery of my own arpillera, which I donated to Esther's project, leaving my mark in one of the film's scenes. Figure 1 shows the room where the embroidering of arpilleras for the film happens and where a group of women taught me how to embroider one.

<sup>7</sup> As I undertake this research, Brazil is facing a critical political moment under the right-wing conservative government of Bolsonaro that has been adopting an agenda of flexibilization of environmental rules, privatizations, dismantling of social policies, and criminalization of social movements.

**Figure 1 - sewing room**



Source: fieldwork, Ubatuba, July 2019

I then went to São Paulo city, where I visited the national office of the MAB and spent a morning with Rose, a national coordinator and member of the women's collective who was important in opening the doors of the movement for my research. After an interview, we looked at the national collection of MAB's arpilleras (see one in Figure 2) while she shared with some of the messages the arpilleras narrate and the context in which they were embroidered, and read some of the letters<sup>8</sup> that each arpillera carries.

**Figure 2 - national arpillera**



Source: fieldwork, São Paulo, July 2019

<sup>8</sup> MAB's arpilleras have a pocket on the back containing a letter with a text that describes the stories and symbols represented on the cloth or sends a message to other women affected by dams.



On August 2019, I drove 750km towards Beltrão, a small city in the southwest of Paraná, where the MAB's local secretariat is located and where I was welcomed by coordinators of MAB-Paraná. This secretariat is a house where they work and meet daily. Two coordinators hosted me when I was in Beltrão, which allowed me to build a closer relationship with them. I stayed in Paraná for two weeks, moving around different communities and spending time with rural families that were affected by the dam and who are (or were) active in the resistance movement. The coordinators had a schedule organized for my first week and I dived into experiencing with the movement. For the second week we arranged my schedule together and on the last days we discussed some of my findings, reflecting collectively.

My encounters with people affected by the dam, all of them rural families were arranged by the coordinators of MAB Paraná. These families received me in their homes. In some cases, I spent a couple of hours with them, while in others I spent the day and stayed overnight. These families were immensely welcoming and open to share their stories, food and *chimarrão* with me. I also met two women that were affected by the Itá dam in the 1990s and leaded the resistance back then. They now live in Paraná and are active members of the MAB. Also, I interviewed members of ALESSOAR, an NGO that played an important role in bringing the MAB to Baixo Iguaçu. I participated in a meeting of the affected families, held in one of the collective rural resettlements, with coordinators of MAB Paraná and members of the local legislature, which was an opportunity to experience a collective space of discussion.

It is important to mention that I decided to drive to Paraná for having more autonomy to move around the region. Notwithstanding, in some occasions I needed guidance to move from one community to another. Two activists guided me: Ezequiel on the left bank of the river, and Leo on the right bank. These young men affected by the dam accompanied me in some of my visits, usually staying with me for a while and then leaving. Ezequiel also took me to visit the power plant, located exactly where his house used to be. It is important to acknowledge that this male presence had effects on my meetings with affected families: while they helped me in breaking the ice and engaging in fluid conversations very fast, they might have made people less comfortable about sharing very personal information, especially women. In some of the encounters with women I felt that the male presence was an obstacle (both for them and for me) to engage in conversations about certain topics.

During the interviews, I used a list of open-ended questions only as a guide, letting the conversations flow naturally and creating the space for the participants to freely share their experiences. The recorded interviews were partially transcribed and then translated. All the direct quotes of the research participants that I include in this RP have been translated to English by me.

### 1.3 Arpilleras as Guides

The arpilleras of women affected by dams were my entry point into a research journey that started with my own fascination with this tool. The arpillera as a means of resistance fascinates me because it is artistic, creative and embodied, it is collective, it challenges the public/ private divide and “integrates what modernity has dichotomized and hierarchized: body and mind, emotion and reason, individuality and collectivity”<sup>10</sup> (Espinosa et al 2013: 417).

I acknowledge that the use of arpilleras as part of a social struggle can be analysed in multiple ways and I want to clarify that I did not do an aesthetic analysis of arpilleras, nor

<sup>9</sup> Traditional South-American infused drink of yerba mate leaves.

<sup>10</sup> My translation

did I try to read and interpret them as text by myself. In some interviews and conversations, I used arpilleras as mediating devices, asking women to describe what was represented in the cloth and the context in which the arpillera was embroidered, reading them *with them*. Also, not having enough time and opportunities for participating in arpilleras-workshops with the MAB – spaces where the arpilleras are collectively created by women – posed some limitations for an analysis focused on arpilleras as pedagogy. Finally, learning that for the women in Baixo Iguaçu arpilleras are just one out of a range of resistance tools and not the central one, made me rethink my questions and slightly change the focus of the research to also encompass other dimensions of the local resistance.

Through the research journey, I realized that the role of arpilleras in this research is also that of guides. I understood that MAB's arpilleras are a political tool that offer women an *alternative language*, a way of saying *otherwise*. This language is an alternative to the colonial, patriarchal, rational, technocratic, and supposedly neutral, objective and apolitical language of hegemonic development discourses (Vital 2017b). The use of a new language not only opens spaces for women affected by dams to express themselves, but also creates opportunities for outsiders – like me, an urban woman who does not suffer the violence of the energy development model in my embodied daily life – to come close to women who do, and to listen to their narratives (Vital 2017a).

Arpilleras were my guides because they tell stories of struggles that I wanted to understand, inviting me to embark on this research journey. The pictures and videos of arpilleras triggered me, and the letters they contain and the multiple materials that the MAB created from these textile testimonies helped me in progressively internalizing these narratives, reflecting on the multiple experiences of different women affected by dams in Brazil, and formulating questions that guided the steps taken in this research.

Arpilleras guided me in this research process that travelled across places, going back and forth like needles on the burlap, encountering different but connected stories, being progressively constructed. In this sense, my RP reminds me of an arpillera. Certainly, I am the one who has the power – the thread and needle are in my hands and I decide how to sew; I am the one who decides how to tell the story and I acknowledge how this carries the danger of (re)producing violence. Yet, this RP is the result of collaborative work and of stories that come together and blend into one another; it is the result of sharing emotions, experiences, homes, and knowledge, *sentipensando*<sup>11</sup> with the members of the MAB in its multiple scales (Escobar 2015).

<sup>11</sup> *Sentipensar* (sensingthinking) is here understood as a way of thinking with both mind and heart, challenging the dichotomization of mind and body, reason and emotion (Escobar 2015: 14).

## Chapter 2 | Hydropower Dams as Development?

In this chapter, I critically discuss the hydropower development narratives and practices that are hegemonic in Brazil. Then, I take the discussion to the local context of Baixo Iguaçu, where the sixth dam in the Iguaçu River was built.

### 2.1 Discourses and Practices of Hydropower Development in Brazil

Brazil is today one of the leading dam-building nations in the world. Hydropower generation started to gain prevalence in the 1950s and has become the dominant energy power source in the country. Over one thousand large hydropower dams are operating in Brazil today (Thorkildsen 2018: 347), and hydropower accounts for 65,2% of the domestic supply of electricity (EPE 2018: 16). From a traditional development perspective, hydropower is considered to have a “multidimensional role in poverty alleviation and sustainable development” (World Bank 2009: 3). Historically, the expansion of hydropower dams was promoted by different Brazilian governments through developmentalist discourses as a national development strategy, as indispensable for the country’s economic growth and as a symbol of progress and modernity (Silva 2007).

I situate hydropower dams within the dynamics of ‘extractivism’ (Acosta 2012; Svampa 2013; Alimonda 2011). Large dam projects in Brazil can be characterized as “sacking mechanism[s], rooted in the appropriation of resources of the colonial and neocolonial period” (Yacoub et al 2015: 119; Acosta 2012). In this logic, rivers are “a resource to be dominated and controlled for the production of energy and its commodification” (Duarte et al 2015: 263) and the “practice of sweeping people from their territories” (Segato 2016: 21) is the norm.

“[G]rounded in a techno-scientific paradigm that underestimates ecological and social risks” (Wichterich 2015: 73), the continuous damming of Brazilian rivers has been driven by the growing demand of urban centres and mostly of electro-intensive sectors such as mining and agro-industry (Zhou et al 2013; Del Bene et al 2018).

The Brazilian state has been a key player in the expansion of hydroelectric infrastructure (Zhou et al 2015) and both right and left-wing governments have promoted hydropower dams as a development strategy. Under the authoritarian period of the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985), several large dams were planned and some implemented. During the 1990s, the government of Cardoso implemented neoliberal reforms promoted by the global financial institutions, bringing profound changes to the energy sector: the marketization of water resources and the privatization of hydropower. The reforms opened the way for foreign investments and private transnational corporations into the sector (Maranho 2016; Yacoub et al. 2015; Acselrad et al 2012; Del Bene 2018). These changes can be contextualized in the global phase of neoliberal capital expansion that deepened violent processes of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003). As put by Harvey (2003: 158), “[s]ince privatization and liberalization of the market was the mantra of the neoliberal movement, the effect was to make a new round of ‘enclosure of the commons’ into an objective of state policies”. The consequence was the strong fusion of government power with private capital power (Svampa 2008: 4). The left-leaning government of the worker’s party (PT) that succeeded the center-right-leaning government of Cardoso was also largely favourable to hydropower development, despite large controversies and contestations (Klein 2015). Hydroelectric projects were a central feature of the most important development



programmes of the PT governments of Lula and then Dilma: the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC) and PAC 2 (Klein 2015: 1139). “[N]early 55 percent of the budget [of the PAC] went to financing energy infrastructure (mainly large dams)” (Zhouiri 2015: 450).

The expansion of dams for power generation in Brazil, historically promoted by a discourse of economic growth, local development, employment opportunities, poverty alleviation and cheap energy, gained new impulses from the global narratives that relabelled large-scale dams as sources of green, clean and sustainable energy, and even as climate change mitigation projects (Borras 2016). This ‘green economy’ and ‘clean development’ discourse that legitimize hydropower expansion is highly contested (Del Bene et al 2018: 618). Research has highlighted the serious environmental and social impacts of dams for some time (i.e. McCully 1996; World Commission on Dams 2000) and social movements have organized anti-dam struggles around the world. The MAB is one of them.

In Brazil, the riverside areas affected by dams are historically inhabited mainly by rural populations and indigenous peoples, who are frequently not consulted about the projects despite being deeply affected by them. The energy model largely results in exploitation of nature and violence against already marginalized communities that inhabit these areas (Maranho 2016: 92), whose sense of place and livelihoods are profoundly attached to the land. The struggles of populations affected by this energy model are frequently stigmatized, treated as irrational and an obstacle to national development. Organized mobilizations against dams or other forms of extractivism usually face repressive responses from the state and are criminalized. Racism and the legacy of colonialism go hand in hand with the hegemonic development model in Brazil; a model that “concentrates economic and political power and, simultaneously, produces social and territorial exclusion” (Porto 2012: 102).

The construction of large-scale dams involves the flooding of large areas of fertile land (Klein 2015; Zhouiri et al 2013) and has resulted in socioenvironmental injustices (Pinto and Oliveira 2013). Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced from their lands, their histories, and their livelihoods, most of them receiving little or no compensation (Del Bene 2018, MAB 2013). Still today, Brazil lacks a legal framework establishing the rights of those affected by dams and the obligations of the companies that build and operate them. In several cases, private companies are the ones deciding who is considered *atingido/a* (affected individual), and determining their compensation.

The definition of *affected* is a disputed and contested one. In general, for the hydropower development sector *atingidos/as* are only those who have been flooded out and who own land titles (Vainer 2009: 176). However, the MAB has a broader definition that includes those who are displaced from the land whether they legally own it or not, those who lose part of their land, those who lose access to resources on which their livelihoods depend, and those who are at risk of flooding as a result of a dam, among other situations. The MAB also demands the recognition of symbolic and cultural impacts of dams on the lives of those affected (MAB 2011: n.p).

The implementation of large dam projects, promoted as sustainable development strategies, silences the popular knowledges and experiences of the local affected populations (Escobar 2015), generating impacts that are not only material, such as land dispossession, displacement, loss of livelihood and access to resources, but also symbolic, cultural, and affective - immeasurable in economic terms (MAB 2010; MAB 2011; Del Bene 2018; Sultana 2015; Harris 2015).

## 2.2 The case of Baixo Iguaçu: a Sixth Dam in the Iguaçu River

In this section, I take the discussion on dams as development from the global and national scale to the grounded local reality of rural families in a place affected by a dam: the region of Baixo Iguaçu, located in Paraná, a state in South Brazil. The area affected by this dam includes parts of five adjacent municipal districts located on both banks of the Iguaçu River. The region is close to the border with Argentina and Paraguay and to the Iguaçu National Park (Map 1).

Map 1 - The Baixo Iguaçu Region



(Source: Baixo Iguaçu 2016, edited by me)

In this region, a large dam was constructed between 2013 and 2018 as part of a hydropower complex: the Baixo Iguaçu Hydroelectric Power Plant, flooding an area of 13.5 km<sup>2</sup> and forming a reservoir of 31,6km<sup>2</sup> (Iberdrola 2019: n.p) (Figure 3). The Baixo Iguaçu dam is the *sixth* one to be constructed in the Iguaçu Basin. The planners refer to this project as the “last energy exploitation of the Iguaçu River”<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.aen.pr.gov.br/modules/noticias/article.php?storyid=102269&tit=Inaugurada-a-Usina-Baixo-Iguacu-no-Sudoeste-do-Estado>

**Figure 3 - aerial photo of the Baixo Iguaçu Power Plant after its inauguration**



Source: Copel 2019

The total area directly affected by the complex encompasses not only the flooded area (reservoir/lake) but also a protection strip that surrounds the lake (100 meters of Permanent Preservation Area) and the site where the construction work of the mega project took place. Consequently, the dam affected close to one thousand rural families that inhabited the margins of the river, most of them small farmers<sup>13</sup>. While some of them were forced to leave their riverside lands before the end of 2018, when the reservoir was filled, others had their lands partially affected and could stay in the leftover land, sometimes having to build a new house. The exact number of displaced people is unknown.

The hydropower dam is operated by a consortium<sup>14</sup> formed by Neoenergia (70%), one of the largest private electric companies in Brazil (controlled by the Spanish multinational group Iberdrola). The remaining 30% is controlled by Copel, the energy company of the state of Paraná. The construction of the power plant complex costed around 500 million euros and was funded mainly by the National Development Bank of Brazil (BNDES) (Baixo Iguaçu 2019: n.p.).

The first hydropower dam project in the Baixo Iguaçu region was sketched out in the 1980s. According to the MAB-Paraná, the reasons why this initial project was not implemented include the massive mobilization organized by local small farmers and cooperatives against the dam and the controversies around its proximity to the National Park of Iguaçu<sup>15</sup>. In 2004, a new project was released as part of the aforementioned Growth Acceleration Programme. In this new project the planned flooded area was reduced for

<sup>13</sup> I am using the terms ‘small farmers’, ‘family farmers’, ‘affected families’, ‘affected people’, and ‘*atingidos/as*’ interchangeably to refer to those who have been directly affected by the dam in Baixo Iguaçu, directly translating from the terms that they use in Portuguese to refer to themselves. The term ‘peasants’ could also be used but because I do not have the space for entering into the wider debate around this politicized concept, I opted for sticking to the terms used by the movement in Baixo Iguaçu.

<sup>14</sup> I will use the term ‘company’ to refer to the consortium that built and operates the Hydropower Dam Baixo Iguaçu.

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the history of the dam-project see: Matiello and Queluz (2015).

guaranteeing the preservation of the National Park. However, due to the multiple disputes regarding the environmental licensing of the project, the construction work did not start until July 2013 (Matiello and Queluz 2015).

In 2014, after an intense period of rain, a major flood affected the region of Baixo Iguaçu, severely impacting the construction of the dam, which stopped for almost two years, only restarting in 2016. In late 2018, the construction was finalized and the plant's reservoir was filled, forming a lake. Finally, in May 2019, the hydropower plant was officially inaugurated and started to produce energy.

Before and during its implementation, the Baixo Iguaçu project was sustained by the local governments and the company with promises of progress, local development and opportunities of employment (see RIMA 2008). During the planning and construction of the dam, the company used the local radios for publicity: jingles with local slang were created for 'selling' the project as beneficial to the local population. The lyrics of one jingle say:

“With the strength of the Iguaçu River,  
Progress asks for permission,  
Accompanied with faith.  
What will make this region grow...  
Is a powerful power plant  
That will help a lot of people  
Will generate energy  
For everyone to live happily.  
It is the progress in the region,  
There will be more energy,  
And employment everyday...  
Go *compadre*, play it again:  
We will grow, we will have more energy,  
We will grow more every day  
It is the Baixo Iguaçu power plant  
The power plant of growth [...]”<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the promises of growth and local development, the project was portrayed as 'sustainable', based on the discourse of 'clean energy'. In its promotional videos, the multinational company Iberdrola claims that the Baixo Iguaçu complex is committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of promoting decent work and economic growth, reducing inequalities, and ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all (Baixo Iguaçu 2019), being thus the way towards a “more sustainable energy model”<sup>17</sup>.

While Iberdrola affirms that the Baixo Iguaçu power plant has “over 350 MW [megawatts] of installed capacity” and “will be able to supply sustainable electricity to one million Brazilians” (Iberdrola 2019: n.p), the MAB characterizes this affirmation as 'misleading', because 60% of the electricity generated by Baixo Iguaçu is designated to the private mining company Vale (MAB 2018: n.p). Along with the MAB, I question: is this production of electricity 'sustainable'? 'Sustainable' for whom? Is it necessary? Whose interests are served?

<sup>16</sup> My translation. For the original jingle in Portuguese see Baixo Iguaçu (2017: 54).

<sup>17</sup> See the promotional Iberdrola's video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=185Abjyd9BE>

## Chapter 3 | Resistance and Mobilization in Baixo Iguaçu

This chapter contextualizes the local resistance and organized mobilization of the families affected by the Baixo Iguaçu dam, describing how it emerged, presenting the MAB and its role in organizing a local collective resistance, and illustrating the reality of Baixo Iguaçu after the river became a lake.

### 3.1 Emergence of the Collective Mobilization

In Baixo Iguaçu, an organized resistance to impede the construction of the dam, in other words a collective ‘no!’ to the project, did not occur until construction had already started<sup>18</sup>. The reasons that explain the initial lack of collective anti-dam action vary. In general, the promises of local development and employment, expectations of good financial compensations and the powerful mechanisms used by the company to publicize their narrative on how the hydropower project was necessary and beneficial to everyone, were pointed out by the small farmers I interacted with as the reasons why there was no early mobilization to stop the dam.

A strong organized mobilization only emerged when the first phase of the construction began, in 2013. The lack of proper consultations, negotiations of compensations with the local communities, and of resettlement plans by the time the construction started generated indignation and despair among the small farmers, triggering the organization of a collective struggle (Matiello and Queluz 2015: 7). With the support of the Catholic Church (The Liberation Theology wing), cooperatives and associations, small farmers convoked the MAB to help. In the words of Cecilia, an affected woman:

“the small farmers called the MAB... we were calling everybody that could help us, because we were desperate, no one knew what to do, because until then we had no idea about dams, the laws, all of that was new for us”<sup>19</sup>.

### 3.2 The Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB)

The MAB is a national social movement organizing the struggle of those affected by dams in different regions in Brazil. The historical roots of the movement are in the local anti-dam struggles of communities and activists in the countryside of South Brazil that emerged during the 1970s. In 1991, the MAB became a national social movement, centralizing the local struggles of people affected by dams (hydroelectric, irrigation and mining dams) in a strong national movement against the dispossession that results from the neoliberal energy development model. Emphasizing social justice, the MAB not only rejects the dominant model but also proposes the construction of an alternative, the ‘popular energy project’<sup>20</sup>. I understand the resistance articulated by the MAB as both material and discursive.

The MAB conducts the resistance simultaneously across multiple scales. Its predominant social base is historically composed of rural workers (Vainer 2009: 180) and the local ground of its struggle is on rural areas and forests, where the damming of rivers occurs.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the coordinators of MAB-Paraná, August 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Cecilia in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>20</sup> See [https://issuu.com/mabnacional/docs/finalcartilha\\_encontro\\_nacional-2013](https://issuu.com/mabnacional/docs/finalcartilha_encontro_nacional-2013)

However, in recent years, the MAB has made an effort to be also present in cities and capitals for alliance-building. The movement is part of international networks such as La Via Campesina (LVC).

The MAB affirms that the state fails to protect people affected by dams and therefore “only the political struggle ensures the defence of rights. Families have only been compensated or had access to information due to their social organization”<sup>21</sup>. Direct action is one of the central strategies employed by the movement “to secure fair negotiations” (Vainer 2009: 186) with dam companies, which usually approach the *atingidos/as* individually and refuse to negotiate with communities collectively or to propose collective solutions (Zhourri 2015).

### 3.3 The MAB in Baixo Iguaçu: Organized Mobilization

In the second half of 2013, the MAB brought its vast experience of organizing political mobilization against powerful dam companies into Baixo Iguaçu. The movement was already active in other regions of the state of Paraná and began to take a protagonist role in the organization of the affected rural families in an united resistance movement (Matiello and Queluz 2015). Mobilizing the idiom of ‘rights’, the main demand of the movement during the dam-construction period was for collective rural resettlement – land for land – so community ties would not be destroyed and a fair distribution of a piece of land was guaranteed to everyone. Also, the MAB demanded proper compensations that would enable conditions for the *atingidos/as* to re-start their lives somewhere else (Brasil de Fato 2016).

The dispute that emerged in Baixo Iguaçu in 2013 involved several different actors. I am focusing here only on two broad camps and emphasizing the power asymmetry between them: the private sector backed by the local governments on the one side, and local affected communities organized in the movement on the other. Alluding to this unequal struggle, small farmers I engaged with use the metaphor ‘an ant against an elephant’.

Since 2013, the lives of the small farmers inhabiting the areas that were going to be flooded or affected by the dam turned upside down. In order to defend their lands, they had to learn how to organize a collective struggle. The daily lives of those who joined the movement had to adapt in order to incorporate local meetings in the different communities, all night drives to the capital of Paraná for public hearings, and assemblies of the communities.

Direct actions such as occupations of the construction site, public protests and blockades of roads became the central strategy of resistance of the movement, as a way to pressure the company to negotiate while calling attention of government authorities and the urban population to the social and ecological injustices taking place. ‘Political education’ encounters<sup>22</sup> – the pedagogical part of the MAB that aims to develop a collective political consciousness among the members – were also organized in Baixo Iguaçu and its surroundings, but this work occupied a secondary place. The local coordinators highlighted that the context demanded direct and fast actions and thus the movement was more invested in this struggle-strategy.

For the affected families, everything was new: what being affected by a dam means and how to collectively struggle for their rights in this new context. It is important to highlight that the principal economic activity of the communities affected by the dam is family farming: mainly the production of milk and grains for small-scale commerce. They also produce vegetables and meat for subsistence and barter. Given that these small farmers do not hire

<sup>21</sup> MAB’s unpublished dossier, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> *formações políticas*, in Portuguese.



workers, joining the collective struggle, in other words, becoming activists, was challenging because it required a partial abandonment of the family agriculture to attend meetings, assemblies, public hearings, or engage in direct actions. The need to solve everyday problems of survival and the need to become activists were hard to balance. This was certainly experienced differently by the people affected, given for instance the gendered division of agricultural labour and unpaid care work within the families, and the unequal means for sacrificing working time on the land without compromising survival among the families.

The aforementioned flood that hit Baixo Iguaçu in 2014 affected 310 families (Globo G1 2015), damaging and washing houses away. Because this major flood was related to the operation of another dam upstream, protests were organized, resulting in financial compensations for those affected by the flood. Even though these compensations paid by Parana's energy company (Copel) were small and characterized as 'humanitarian help', the movement's members proudly refer to this achievement. The local mobilization after the flood of 2014 is a milestone in the resistance of those affected by the dam in Baixo Iguaçu.

When, in 2016, the construction of the dam was rapidly progressing, the movement occupied the construction site for 48 days. This was the longest of several occupations and one that particularly marked the local resistance. The movement refused to end the occupation unless the company finally accepted to negotiate terms of agreement with them. As it occurred during other occupations, the government responded with criminalization, violence and repression: on 8 September 2016, during an action of repossession of the construction site, the military police sent in shock troops and used tear-gas bombs and rubber bullets against the demonstrators. One woman was seriously wounded, and several men were arrested (MAB 2016). Small farmers in Baixo Iguaçu referred to 8 September 2016 as 'the massacre day'.

An agreement was achieved after five years of direct actions and negotiations, resulting in the increase on the value paid by the company for the lands that had to be taken and the establishment of a resettlement plan. This agreement was focused on economic matters and according to the MAB was not fully respected by the company (MAB 2019a).

### **3.4 Life in Baixo Iguaçu After the River Became a Lake**

"the river becomes a lake. Before, you could see a river. Now, you are looking at a lake. You might think it is the same because it is still water. But it is not. It is different. Because a lake is dead water. The river flowed, the river had life. They killed our river."

*(Celia, personal interview, August 2019)*

The dam reservoir that flooded lands, houses, trees and histories is now a central part of the modified landscape in Baixo Iguaçu, as can be seen in the picture taken from the land of Elza, a woman affected by the dam (Figure 4).

**Figure 4 - the lake and the power plant in the background**



Source: fieldwork, Capitão Leônidas Marques, August 2019

Several communities were largely destroyed. Most families were displaced: some peacefully after an agreement, while others in violent actions of eviction, with the invasion and destruction of their houses<sup>23</sup>. The great majority of the affected people were displaced and received a ‘letter of credit’ from the company, to be used for buying agricultural land somewhere else or a house in the city. Some of the affected families have left the region and either bought or rented other land or abandoned rural life and moved to urban areas<sup>24</sup>. Only 18 families were resettled by the company. According to the MAB, close to 300 families were eligible for collective rural resettlement in the terms of the signed agreement, but “the company strongly acted to deny the right to collective rural resettlement, [...] using different mechanisms to encourage affected-families to accept the ‘letter of credit’, including pressure and threats”<sup>25</sup>. Some families did not have to leave the land once it was only partially affected, which in several cases is a major issue given that one part of the land does not survive without the other. Lastly, there are close to 70 families that had still not received any form of compensation for their losses: either their rights have been completely denied by the company (they are not recognized as affected) or there was no agreement and the company took their cases to court.

In August 2019, by the time I visited Baixo Iguaçu, the dam reservoir had been filled, the power plant had begun generating energy, the company’s local office had been dismantled and the collective struggle had been partially demobilized. Most of my conversations with *atingidos/as* were centred in their experiences of the last six years; years marked by a process of struggle that is not over but has lost momentum. This is why I tell some of the stories using the past tense.

The river in which people used to swim, fish, and sail became a lake. This lake is fenced, and the access to it is restricted and controlled by the company, as indicated by the signs

<sup>23</sup> See one of these actions: <https://youtu.be/VwjT9WKMQRI>

<sup>24</sup> Silvio in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Ana in collective interview, August 2019.



posted around it (Figure 5). The company has, in partnership with local governments, a plan for transforming part of the surroundings of the lake into a tourist zone. So far, neither this plan nor other local development plans related to the dam have been implemented. In Celia's words: "we have bled out for this electricity to be generated. It is always the same, promises of progress but for us nothing improves."<sup>26</sup>

The use of the lake is today restricted to energy generation. Ezequiel, an affected man that used to live exactly where the power plant stands today, shared his view:

"the company has taken the river from us. They have forced us to leave the land. Now they are appropriating the water, because for them water is a source of profit. [...] "Dams today are quite criminal, even though they say it is clean energy, in reality it is a big dirty mess that drowns lives, cultures and nature."<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 5 - "only authorized people"**



Source: fieldwork, Realeza, August 2019

<sup>26</sup> Celia in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Ezequiel in personal interview, August 2019.

## Chapter 4 | Women Affected by Dams in Resistance

In this chapter, I explore the embroidered resistance of women affected by the dam. First, I situate theoretically the discussion on women's resistance. Second, I contextualize the emergence of women's self-organizational spaces within the MAB and their adoption of *arpilleras*. Third, I examine the multiple meanings, roles and transformative potentials of *arpilleras* as a tool of resistance of women in the MAB. Finally, I analyse the different dimensions of the everyday, embodied, and emotional struggles of women in Baixo Iguaçu and the transformation of sewing into politics at the local level.

### 4.1 Experiences of Everyday Resistance

Debates on dams and gender largely focus on the *impacts* of dispossession on women, “who are often understood as a specifically vulnerable group” (Resurrección 2017: 79). Rejecting neoliberal approaches that privilege material and measurable ‘impacts’ (Resurrección 2017: 79), I use the language of ‘impacts’ carefully. From an FPE perspective, what I am looking at are the embodied experiences of women affected by the dam, their knowledges and emotions. Being critical of the idea of ‘impacts’ of dams on women is also about escaping from talking about women affected by dams as victims with a single-axis identity.

When I talk about women, I acknowledge that “women's experiences and histories are multiple and that there is no unique or universal category that expresses what it is to be a woman” (Harcourt, Icaza and Vargas 2016: 151). Women affected by dams in Brazil are diverse and encompass multiple complex identities – as women, as *quilombolas*<sup>28</sup>, *ribeirinhas*<sup>29</sup>, indigenous, peasants/small farmers, as members of the working class, as mothers, as activists, and so on. Their experiences and knowledges are embodied and marked by intersecting power relations and exclusions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and others. I am not looking to discover truth in women's ‘experiences’; following Scott (1991: 795), I perceive that it is difficult (if possible at all) to find a “single narrative” of experience and “[w]hat counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political” (Scott 1991: 797).

Regarding resistance, I do not aim to define or enter into the broader debate around this concept, but to spell out that I am looking at the politics of power and resistance paying attention to everyday practices of resistance as well as organized political action. In that sense, I understand that not only women's active participation in the organized struggle of the MAB qualify as resistance but also their daily struggles for survival (Harcourt et al 2017: 6). Engaging with Foucault's approach to power, I “do not regard power as a phenomenon of mass and homogeneous domination” or as a structure but rather as something that is exercised and circulates everywhere (Foucault 2003: 29). I analyze resistance as “an opposition to the effects of power” at the everyday level (Foucault 1982: 781).

When I bring the stories of women affected by a dam, I recognize both their subjective and collective experiences and situated knowledges, to avoid essentializing their identities. I understand that they are not a homogenous group and that their historically and contextually situated experiences of resistance are not equal and cannot be generalized for all women affected by dams in Brazil. I am here reflecting on the reality of Baixo Iguaçu, where women

<sup>28</sup> Afro-Brazilians that descent of escaped slaves who formed communities (*quilombos*).

<sup>29</sup> Traditional populations living near the rivers (mostly in the Amazon basin) whose livelihoods are attached to the river.

affected by the dam that engaged in the MAB are small farmers, members of the rural-working-class. The women of different generations that I encountered identify as white women, most of them are descendants of Italians or/and Germans, and the majority of them are mothers. Their collective identity is deeply marked by the fact that they are family farmers, that they have been affected by a dam, and that they are activists. This is very relevant in terms of their resistance and I found that *arpilleras* function as a means to consolidate this collective identity, as I will further discuss.

Although I focus my attention on women's resistance, I do not understand their resistance in isolation from the resistances of the affected families. Women are resisting with their partners, children, brothers etc. I observed the notion of family being central in the context of Baixo Iguaçu. These women affected by a dam in South Brazil see themselves as part of the group of families affected by the Baixo Iguaçu dam, and more broadly as part of the exploited rural-working-class.

## 4.2 Why Women?

I focus on women's resistances not only because I started my engagement with this research topic through the *arpilleras* – a political tool used by women affected by dams in Brazil, but also because, from a FPE perspective, I find it relevant to “bring to the centre the knowledge and practices of women which are often not recognized as political” (Harcourt 2017: 282), largely excluded from processes permeated by power that affect them in multiple scales: their bodies, families, lands and communities.

Women affected by dams in Brazil are resisting a neoliberal energy development model that produces different forms of discrimination and violence, determined by interconnecting power relations of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and urban-rural divides. I dedicate particular attention to how women's experiences of dam-building in their lands are shaped by existing and emerging complex gendered power relations which are often taken as ‘natural’ (Resurrección 2018: 78). Household divisions of labour, differing resource rights between men and women, historical patterns of domination, the invisibilization of women's productive and reproductive work (Elmhirst 2015: 521-522), the disregard of their popular knowledge, community ties and sense of belonging, and the violent commodification of their bodies, among others, affect the way they experience the extractivist construction of a dam on their territories.

I argued that large-scale dams can be characterized as extractivist projects embedded in a colonial logic of appropriation of nature for its commodification. As stated by Amaia Perez Orozco (2014: 25), the decisions around extractivist projects are made by the “white, bourgeois, male and adult subject” that in this case represents the state and private companies in processes that largely exclude the local communities affected, and women in particular. This reinforces “existing patriarchal norms and gender disparities” (Behrman et al 2012: 69). The knowledge and policies of implementation of dam projects “intersect with gender hierarchies at different scales”, bringing “important gendered effects” (Elmhirst 2015: 523). The hydropower development sector is extremely masculine and as argued by Shrestha et al (2019: 5), “the relative absence of women from water science, knowledge, decision-making, planning and implementation implies that there is an inherent performance and reproduction of a culture of masculinity in these spaces”.

In contexts of territorial disputes, women who undertake leadership roles in the social struggles for rights are in great risk of being victims of violence and even femicide (Lozano 2016: 15). Recently, two MAB's activists – Nicinha and Dilma Ferreira – were assassinated

in North Brazil because of their work in the defence of the rights of women, nature and life<sup>30</sup>. Nicinha and Dilma are with Berta Cáceres and Marielle Franco in the long list of those eliminated by a project against life (Walsh 2017; Figure 6). This project treats certain people “as disposable because of their gender, condition of impoverishment and racialization, and their struggles to defend their lands, rivers, forests and dignity against the greed, destruction, exploitation and interests of capital”<sup>31</sup> (Walsh 2017: 22). A strategy for the perpetuation of this project is what Rita Segato called the “pedagogy of cruelty”: a pedagogy that “reduce[s] human empathy and train[s] people to tolerate and perform acts of cruelty” (Segato 2016: 622). Discussing Segato’s proposal, Virgina Vargas (2017: 301) added that in this understanding “women’s bodies are the canvas on which the marks of the pedagogy of cruelty are expressed, where power gravitates as a strategy for reproducing the system”.

Resisting the project of death, the MAB continues the struggles of these assassinated leaders affirming: “they tried to bury us, but they did not know that we were seeds!” (MAB 2019b: 5).

Figure 6 – “our struggle is for life! No more impunity!”



Source: MAB 2019b

<sup>30</sup> MAB activist in video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=So48glQcWJI&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3sqY72\\_uogA1YrB\\_178ubB6Tq6tSRxfLL915dZ9MvIP196BHHJ0TnI-8k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=So48glQcWJI&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3sqY72_uogA1YrB_178ubB6Tq6tSRxfLL915dZ9MvIP196BHHJ0TnI-8k)

<sup>31</sup> My translation.

### 4.3 ‘Women, water and energy are not commodities!’

A milestone of the organized struggle of women affected by dams in Brazil was their first national meeting held in 2011. Women in the MAB were increasingly denouncing gendered violence and women’s exclusion from spaces of negotiation and decision-making. A public human rights report published in 2010 concluded that continuous building of dams resulted in systematic violations of human rights and that the patterns of violations are worse against women (CDDPH 2010). This public recognition gave weight to women’s demands. During their meeting, held in Brasília, they created a national collective of women of the MAB, composed of female leaders. This collective defined as one of its priorities to stimulate the political participation and leadership of women (MAB 2011: 2). At their meeting, women wrote a collective letter in which they stated that “the development model [...] based on individualism, competition, consumerism, in which everything becomes a commodity, including women’s bodies [...] is unjust and unsustainable. [...] Women, water and energy are not commodities!” (MAB 2011: 1-2).

Since then, women in the MAB have strengthened their auto-organization, increasingly occupying leadership and coordination positions, and started to bring other issues, such as gender inequalities, to the movement’s agenda. In our conversations, coordinators highlighted that the challenging of gendered orderings of everyday life was and still is a particularly hard struggle. They also stressed that women are not trying to build their separate movement but demanding their voices to be also heard, and that through this struggle they are transforming and strengthening the MAB.

This resonates with what Flórez (2014) proposes on the need to understand collective struggles as places of resistance to the workings of power but also as places where power relations are reproduced. The struggle of women in the MAB to challenge gendered power relations speaks to the inclusions and exclusions and the fact that despite the strategy to speak with one unified voice (i.e. ‘we are all affected’), the movement is also marked by internal inequalities, disputes and resistance to domination. I also observed this at the local level. Two local coordinators shared with me that because they are young women, they faced challenges for having their voices heard in Baixo Iguaçu, a region where women are not the ones expected to lead or to speak<sup>32</sup>.

Beatriz, an urban activist of the MAB who was affected by one of the dams in Paraná when she was a child, mentioned that “in Baixo Iguaçu there are mostly men as leaders”, which is why “arpilleras became so important, as part of an intentional work [...] through which it is possible to include women in decision spaces”<sup>33</sup>. As echoed by this activists, arpilleras have turned into a relevant tool for strengthening the political participation of women affected by dams.

### 4.4 Arpillera as Resistance: from Chile to Brazil

Arpillera is a textile technique that originated in Isla Negra, Chile. The well-known folklorist Violeta Parra played an important role in disseminating this artisan work (Bacic 2011). During the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), groups of Chilean women used arpilleras as a political tool against the regime. Marjorie Agosín (1996: 10) describes arpilleras as a popular Latin American art that was born both from adversity and daily life: “in English it means [embroideries on] burlap; in Spanish it came to mean the cloth of resistance”. According to Agosín (1996: 27), “[t]he visual language of the arpilleras is a language of

<sup>32</sup> Lucia and Ana in personal interviews, August 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Beatriz in personal interview, August 2019.

emotion”. The words of Isabel Allende (1996: xi-xii) illustrate how women’s lives were affected by the authoritarian regime of Pinochet: “[r]epression destroyed their families, extreme poverty paralyzed them, and fear condemned them to silence”. In this context, groups of women started to make arpilleras in order to express and expose the oppression and suffering that they were enduring. “With leftovers of fabric and simple stitches, the women embroidered what could not be told in words, and thus the arpilleras became powerful forms of political resistance” (Allende 1996: xii). This tool of political resistance has travelled from Chile to the rest of world:

“Arpilleras and quilts have been a means of artistic expression by women worldwide to depict the horrors and atrocities of human rights abuses. Sewing, embroidering, appliqueing and stitching, women explore the effects of armed conflict, suppression, vulnerability, violence and trauma, among other ordeals in their daily lives” (Bacic and Sanfeliu n.d.: n.p.)

In 2011, a collection of arpilleras travelled to Brazil for an exhibition organized by Roberta Bacic – Chilean human rights researcher and curator of arpilleras. Carried out in the Resistance Memorial in São Paulo, the event included several arpilleras workshops, in which members of the MAB’s national collective of women had a first encounter with the arpilleras. After this first contact, inspired by the Chilean arpilleras, members of the women’s national collective of the MAB brought to life, with the support of Roberta Bacic, a project for using arpilleras as a tool on the struggle of women affected by dams in Brazil and obtained financial support from the European Union. In 2013, a group of coordinators of the collective of women of the MAB travelled to Buenos Aires to participate in workshops supervised by Roberta in order to learn more about the technique of arpilleras and produced the first arpillera of the MAB’s collective of women (Vital 2019). Starting in 2013, national and local workshops with women affected by dams were organized to spread the arpilleras-technique. In 2015, the first exhibition of the arpilleras of women affected by dams was organized in the Latin America Memorial in São Paulo<sup>34</sup>.

## 4.5 Arpillera as a Multi-scalar Resistance Tool in the MAB

Arpilleras as tools of resistance used by women in the MAB travel across the different scales of the struggles the movement articulates. Along my research journey with the MAB, I found arpilleras to have multiple meanings and roles in the different organizational levels of the movement and scales of resistances. In this section I explore them, departing from the understanding that arpillera is a language, an alternative language women are using for expressing their knowledges, emotions and experiences *otherwise*.

### ***Characterizing MAB’s arpilleras***

An important characteristic of the arpilleras of women affected by dams in Brazil is that they are collective, built by multiple hands (see Figure 13). This means that they contain multiple narratives in one narrative<sup>35</sup>. Different from the Chilean arpilleras, those elaborated by women in the MAB are not for sale, they are exhibited in museums and universities, used as instruments of mobilization. As can be observed in the arpillera embroidered by women affected by the Hydropower Dam Itá (Figure 7), MAB’s arpilleras have a pocket on the back, in which the women who make them put a letter describing the stories and symbols represented in the arpillera, or with a message to other women affected by dams. Celia, a woman displaced by the Itá dam, shared with me that the letter “is very important” and that

<sup>34</sup> See details on the exhibition: <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/search-quilts/fullevent/?id=138>

<sup>35</sup> Esther in personal interview, July 2019.





### *Arpilleras as a popular education feminist methodology*

At the MAB's national collective of women, the potential of arpilleras for promoting change can be perceived. In Esther's words:

“the national women's collective as a body is consolidated thanks to the process of producing arpilleras. Thanks to the fact that the women of the MAB build themselves a new language to speak about who they are and how they want to make an alternative production of knowledge about the oppressions they live, they are the ones creating it [...]. The language of the arpillera makes it possible for them to be the ones doing it”<sup>41</sup>.

According to Rose, coordinator of the national women's collective:

“The tool of arpilleras strengthened our collective. It brought us an important instrument to materialize what we had started to understand. It helped us reflect. It translated. [...] The tool suited us very well because we were already going through this process of identifying the violations. Arpilleras were there to help us on that task. The tool helped us to translate what women are feeling here in this community, and there in that community”<sup>42</sup>

Arpilleras contribute to the promotion of a feminist debate inside the movement. Discussing and resignifying feminism from their contexts is a recent and ongoing process within the MAB, and definitely mostly at the national-coordination level. Women in the national collective are advancing in systematizing and conceptualizing their arpillera-experience, developing their own “popular education feminist methodology” (MAB 2015b: 48). In this conceptualization, arpilleras both create the space for and function as a popular education methodology, in Paulo Freire's (1970) terms.

I relate the idea of arpilleras as a popular education feminist methodology with the pedagogical reflections of decolonial feminists (Espinosa et al 2013: 410-411) and find that arpilleras are a methodology that can be applied to:

“seek in community experiences and senses that which is there but is not enunciated, or has been systematically silenced because it attacks the conventions and the truths imposed through imperial reason and the colonality of power and being. The different subjectivities, experiences, knowledges, gazes and cultural interpretations are put into dialogue in such a way that a deontologizing process is carried out”<sup>43</sup>.

I understand that a ‘deontologizing’ process is carried out when the language of arpilleras is applied to a popular education feminist methodology, making it possible “to dismantle the assumed, naturalized truths [...], advancing in the production of a consciousness of oppression, denaturalizing the instituted and oppressive world”<sup>44</sup> (Espinosa et al 2013: 412). Arpilleras facilitate the space of reflexions based on experiences of struggle and resistance, of problematization and questioning, both individually and collectively.

According to a local coordinator that facilitates arpilleras-workshops in Paraná: “it is through the construction of arpilleras and the debate it generates that ideas emerge... ‘what is this violation?’ ‘Why?’ That is how we discuss it, through the act of sewing, that is easier for us”<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Esther in personal interview, July 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Rose in personal interview, July 2019.

<sup>43</sup> My translation.

<sup>44</sup> My translation.

<sup>45</sup> Nora in collective interview, August 2019.



### *Arpilleras as means for creating collective identity*

At multiple scales of the movement, arpilleras also create moments for women to come together, discuss, share experiences and build a collective identity. With the language of arpilleras, women can name what they are going through, problematize, see their stories reflected in the stories of each other, and make connections across places. Room for them to elaborate their critiques and express their desires is opened. An arpilleras-workshop is, according to Esther, a collective space of conceptualization, in which a group identity – as women affected by dams – is created. This strengthens the organization at the local level of a group of affected women, at the level of the MAB's collective of women, and of the MAB as a national movement<sup>46</sup>.

The creation of spaces of self-organization of women within a mixed-gender movement is related to the recognition of a need for “[a] space of encounter [...]”. An exclusive space that facilitates the multiple gaze, in which one woman can be a mirror of the other, not because they are equal or on equal social conditions, but because they live similar oppressive experiences”<sup>47</sup> (Santos 2019: 48). According to the local coordinator Nora, the fact that arpilleras-workshops are ‘only women’ spaces makes it easier for them to discuss their experiences<sup>48</sup>.

## **4.6 Everyday, Embodied, Emotional Struggles of Women Affected by a Dam**

“the feeling they couldn’t compensate and the *saudade*<sup>49</sup> is permanent”

(Celia in personal interview, August 2019)

After exploring arpilleras as a multi-scalar tool of resistance in the MAB, this section turns to the everyday, embodied, emotional (Harris 2015) struggles of women in Baixo Iguaçu. I bring particular attention to how dams affect them not only in material but also affective, emotional, symbolic and cultural ways. As the dam affects the land, it affects projects, plans, and histories. It is not only a financial matter, it is about belonging, intersubjective relations, feelings, history and culture<sup>50</sup>. According to Sultana (2015: 634), “conflicts over resources are [...] as much about embodied emotions, feelings and lived experiences as they are about property rights and entitlements”.

In their narratives, women expressed emotions of fear, pain, sadness, anxiety, and rage in relation to the construction of the dam in their lands. Uncertainty about the future, fear of being evicted, worry of floods, fright of criminalization, rage in the face of injustices, suffering from losing the land, sadness about not recognizing the landscape anymore, and *saudade* of the place from where they were displaced are some of the feelings they brought up in our dialogues. At the same time, these women talked about their strength, pride and courage, especially in relation to their engagement in direct actions and confrontations, and to the knowledge they built from the experience of having to fight for their rights. Emotions of loss, sadness and rage coexist with senses of courage and strength. Women’s daily struggles were described by them as difficult and painful experiences, but also as ones of tremendous learning. The sense of political empowerment was strongly emphasized by them.

<sup>46</sup> Esther in personal interview, July 2019.

<sup>47</sup> My translation.

<sup>48</sup> Nora in collective interview, August 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Portuguese word for referring to a feeling of absence.

<sup>50</sup> Director of NGO Asessoar in personal interview, August 2019.

Below, I describe and reflect on some dimensions of the daily struggles of women affected by the dam, based on my observations, and multiple conversations and interviews in Paraná. Dimensions of the struggles that were emphasized by them and can also be identified in their arpilleras encompass: family and community ties and relation with the land, health problems, violence, labour burden, exclusion and silencing, and political participation and empowerment.

### ***Family and community ties and relation with the land***

Dam-induced displacement results in the destruction of communities and separation of families. The destruction of community and family ties leaves painful imprints on women and makes their daily lives harder as their care and support networks are destroyed. The arpillera in Figure 8 is entitled ‘The loss of family and community life’.

**Figure 8 - arpillera created by women affected by dams in the Iguaçu River**



Source: MAB Paraná 2014<sup>51</sup>

The letter of this arpillera says:

“In a community, social relationships are driven by trust, mutual help, friendship, and unity. In these spaces, in addition to family ties, there is also a community daily life of cooperation [...]. Beyond this, each person has an affective, symbolic feeling of belonging to his/her land. With the construction of a dam, all these bonds are destroyed, because the community and family life are disrupted. Generally, the negative impacts caused by the construction of a hydroelectric power plant are greater than its benefits, since they mainly serve the interests of capital. Families are left helpless [...]. The companies are not concerned about the changes and impacts they may cause to those affected, but rather about the profits they may generate.

<sup>51</sup> Unpublished work.

Thus, it is through struggle, mobilization and organization that we can mitigate these consequences”<sup>52</sup> (MAB Paraná, November 2014).

Cleusa, whose land was partially flooded by the dam, described that despite receiving what she characterized as a good financial compensation for the portion of land that was taken, the main changes in her life could not be compensated, as they relate to her health and her community, which in her words were “stolen by the dam”: “our neighbourhood is practically destroyed. We used to be about 40 families living together, playing soccer, partying together, we had our church [...]. This community does not exist anymore because everyone was spread around”<sup>53</sup>. The soccer field was flooded. The church lost half of its members. The small grocery store has closed. The community as she knew it has been torn apart.

The dam causes the destruction of the community ties, and this is felt by those who stay on the land, like Cleusa, as by those who leave, like it is the case of Celia. She was resettled with her family and said: “as a family we are still together, but we were part of a bigger family, of a community!”<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the destruction of communities, the dam also causes the separation of families, as it is the case of Elza, who is 78-years-old and has been living on the right bank of the river since the 1960s. Her 11 children and their families used to live on a piece of land that was partially flooded by the dam. Today she is the only one that still lives there. While the rest of the family accepted to move out, she decided to stay in the remaining land and built a new house. She explained that after several decades of living in there and being almost 80 years-old, moving somewhere else did not make sense for her, even if she had to stay alone. Some of her children moved to the city, while others got another rural land nearby. I visited Elza’s daughter, Cecilia, and met one of her granddaughters and great-granddaughters, who now live in a rural area 100 kilometres away from the land where they were all born. For these women of different generations of a family that used to live together, it is arduous to face this separation.

After years of uncertainty about the future and intense participation in collective mobilization, Elza got to negotiate with the company about her compensation. There were two conditions, she said, for her to accept what the company offered as a compensation for the part of her riverside land that she had to give away: all her 11 children had to be compensated and her fig tree (Figure 9) had to be preserved<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> My translation

<sup>53</sup> Cleusa in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Celia in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Elza in personal interview, August 2019.

Figure 9 - Elza's fig tree, intact, right next to the lake



Source: fieldwork, Capitão Leônidas Marques, August 2019

The story of Elza and her fig tree are illustrative of another *affective* tie that is threatened and sometimes destroyed by a dam: the connection with the land. Pointing to the lake, Elza told me: “there, where I lived, there were so many trees. I used to drink lots of herbal teas, for everything. And there were also fruits, native ones. Here I couldn’t find any of those. [...] There is so much that we lost and now is just a memory”.

Relations with the territory are disrupted by the modification of the landscape and the presence of a company that controls access to resources, including water. One of the losses emphasized by different women is the flooding of native vegetation and the resulting lack of herbs for their medicinal teas. The logic of the company towards the territory is completely different to that of the family farmers for whom not only livelihoods but also history and culture are often deeply attached to the land and the river.

## **Health**

The construction of a dam in their lands had consequences for women’s health, especially mental health. In our conversations, *atingidas* talked about the psychological suffering that the dam caused: they started to have trouble sleeping, feeling depressed and anxious, and having to take anti-depressants. They shared stories of suicides in Baixo Iguaçu and of people who died ‘before their time’ because of emotional distress.

In Diana’s words: “the psychological pressure is so intense that you just get sick. [...] I have only been able to stop taking anti-depressants 5 months ago. I have been through a really strong depression. To confront this dam was too heavy for me”<sup>56</sup>. For Cecilia, sleeping while a dam was being built next to her was hard: “you can’t, you don’t sleep. Before I didn’t have high blood pressure and now I do because of that [the dam]. It was just too much”. She continued: “there is nothing I can do about my health; I won’t get it back. I will have to be treated for the rest of my life because of them [the company], and that is something they just don’t see, they can’t compensate”<sup>57</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> Diana in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Cecilia in personal interview, August 2019.

Emotional distress comes also from the fear of criminalization and repression of the resistance, and as a consequence of not knowing what is going to happen in the near future, as Jaqueline said: “your life suddenly stops. We had to stop because we didn’t know where we were going. You don’t work, you don’t plant. You just wait. [...] The health problems I have now I inherited from the dam”<sup>58</sup>.

Cleusa’s experience further captures this reality:

“Sometimes I remember everything that we went through and it causes me untold anguish, because the hassle was so big, [...], because our life turned upside down, [...] there was no more peace. [...] I think that the distress was so terrible that I got sick, now I have a problem in my uterus and still today I could not cure it, I am going through a treatment”<sup>59</sup>.

## **Violences**

The organized resistance of those affected by dams is frequently violently repressed and Baixo Iguaçu was not an exception. Women described violent actions of the police against them in protests and occupations.

There are two aspects of the violence faced by women in a dam-building context that I highlight here. The first one is the violent sexist stigmatization of women in resistance. In general, small farmers active in the resistance against the dam were treated by the company and by part of the local governments and urban populations as obstacles to development, *vagabundos* (loafers) and *baderneiros* (trouble makers). Jaqueline, Mirta, Celia and Cecilia shared with me stories on how they were stigmatized for their participation in the struggle, sometimes also by family members. They described that because of their engagement in the collective struggle they were frequently accused of abandoning their families and called *putas* (whores). My two male guides also shared stories on women’s stigmatization; in the words of Ezequiel, “here there’s a lot of discrimination against women who go to the struggle and stay out for days”<sup>60</sup>.

There is an imaginary of the *bad woman* that is constructed in this context about those women that transgress the imposed [hetero] patriarchal normativity (García-Torres 2017: 145). According to Jaqueline, “we were treated as criminals, as everything bad that exists”. Celia, who was affected by the Itá dam in the 1990s, shared a similar story:

“in the city many people were against us. They offended us, especially us women, we were insulted all the time. They would say ‘women’s place is at home, what are you doing here? *Vagabundas!* Go take care of your children!’. For me it seems that the more they offended us the more our blood would boil in our veins, because we knew that we were just fighting for our rights!”<sup>61</sup>.

The second aspect is related to the violent commodification of certain women’s bodies that typically occur in extractivist contexts. As described by Rita Segato (2018: 11), extractive companies that settle in the countryside and small villages of Latin America to extract resources bring with them brothels and result in the objectification of women’s bodies. With the arrival of close to three thousand almost only male workers for the construction of the dam, a new demand for sex work was created in the region of Baixo Iguaçu. While demands for sex work during dam construction is certainly not exclusive to this region, as according to a MAB’s national coordinator, “the dam-industry and the prostitution industry work

<sup>58</sup> Jaqueline in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Cleusa in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Ezequiel in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Celia in personal interview, August 2019.

together, historically”, it has local implications. In Baixo Iguaçu, several prostitution houses were built right next to the entrance of the dam-construction site and destroyed after the construction finalized and the workers left. In Figure 10, the debris of one of them can be observed. The majority of the construction workers and the sex workers were brought by the company from other regions, mainly from North Brazil<sup>62</sup>. Cleusa lived very close to the construction site and shared that the dam brought ‘social problems’ to the communities including increasing alcoholism, gendered violence, sexually transmitted diseases, divorces, teenage pregnancies, and what she called ‘the children of the dam’<sup>63</sup>.

**Figure 10 - former prostitution houses**



Source: fieldwork, Capanema, August 2019

### ***Labour burden***

Engaging in the collective organized struggle had implications to women in terms of their already overburdened working journeys. In rural Brazil, households usually have clear demarcations about the gendered division of labour: women are responsible for the productive work on the land, as men are, but also for the [invisibilized] domestic care work. If they join the collective resistance, their work is tripled. In Celia’s words: “women get overloaded. I’ve always crocheted, always knitted, always cooked. I’ve always tried to have my house tidy. I sewed for my children. And I was also outside taking part on the struggles. And in the end, it was a triple work journey”<sup>64</sup>.

Also, among the women who become leaders and engage in direct actions there is a painful sense of abandonment of their families and lands. This is exemplified below by the narrative of Diana, a young affected woman, mother of three boys, who also refers to the challenges of women whose husbands are leaders:

“Sometimes it’s like your strength is not enough. Your household-work accumulates. You abandon your own family. [...] During the occupations I had to leave my children with my mother, I suffered a lot”. [...] And even before, when I was not directly involved in the

<sup>62</sup> Ezequiel in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Cleusa in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Celia in personal interview, August 2019.



struggle, my husband was, for years. I had to stay alone and take care of everything, our milk cows, three children. [...] I can say that the women who did not participate in the movement but had husbands in the front line, out all the time, they suffered a lot. Because in addition to our women's duties that are not easy... they might seem easy but in reality we need to unfold in two or three to be capable of taking care of everything, [...]women had to double their work journey.”<sup>65</sup>

### ***Exclusion and silencing***

In decision-making spaces, especially in negotiations with the company and the representatives of the state – deeply masculine spaces –, women were largely absent. Dam companies adopt a very restrictive and patrimonial conception of ‘affected’, consequently when a representative of the company arrives to a territory for any kind of communication, they look for the owner of the property. Given that in the Brazilian countryside women largely still lack independent rights in property (Agarwal 2003; Deere 2003), they are frequently excluded from any kind of negotiation; they are invisible to the company (MAB 2018).

Women's exclusion goes actually beyond the patrimonial question; they are not recognized as valid interlocutors regardless of their rights in property. The company arrives on the land asking for “the man in the house” or “the male head of the family”. Furthermore, when I asked them about their participation in negotiation spaces, some women told me that they were afraid of participating or too shy to do it, or they felt that they did not know enough thus were not capable of doing it. Ivone's narrative exemplifies this fear of speaking in negotiations: “I was too afraid you know? It was a terror for me. I was afraid of saying something wrong, of making a mistake”<sup>66</sup>.

I observed that women's opinions are not only ignored by the state and the company, sometimes they are also ignored by their families, their communities or even by themselves. As a result, these women are neglected when for instance they refuse to sell their lands and are excluded from resettlement planning and negotiation of compensations. Figure 11 shows an arpillera in which women represented themselves with their mouths covered.

<sup>65</sup> Diana in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Ivone in personal interview, August 2019.

Figure 11 - arpillera 'violence against women'



Source: MAB Paraná 2014

### *Political participation and empowerment*

In one of the affected communities, Ivone said: “in the leadership and negotiation there were mainly men, 90% men, but in direct actions women were very present, always at the front you know? It is not a coincidence that on the massacre day the one wounded by a rubber-bullet was a woman”<sup>67</sup>. According to Diana: “the movement needed women to participate, otherwise the negotiations are *machistas*, you know? Because there were only men negotiating”<sup>68</sup>.

Jaqueline is one of the few women who was part of the leadership. She also participated in political education meetings with the movement, including arpillera-workshops:

“something I learnt from these years of struggle... well because I was a housewife, I used to take care of my house, that was my duty, to take care of the house, of my children, of the production here in the land. But I knew nothing about how to struggle, so I learnt through political education. Before, I could not speak in public, at all. Can you believe that? I did not speak, no way. [...] If I heard my voice I would feel bad, start shaking. I was shy, too shy, so then when I started the political education I was quiet. ‘I am just a rural farmer’, I thought then, ‘I don’t know how to speak’. [...] These years of struggle were a school for me that maybe not even you have had. I learnt about our rights and I learnt that I could speak”<sup>69</sup>.

<sup>67</sup> Ivone in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Diana in personal interview, August 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Jaqueline in personal interview, August 2019.



Similarly, in Ivone's experience, "the Baixo Iguaçu dam stole some years from our lives, but it also forced us to learn about struggles and rights in a way that we would have never imagined"<sup>70</sup>.

In their narratives, women describe with emotion how the arrival of the dam company turned their lives upside down but also their engagement in a collective struggle changed their lives completely, in a very positive way. I observed a strong sense of political empowerment that results from the experiences of engaging in organized mobilization, participating in political education and discussion spaces – such as arpilleras-workshops – and daily resisting and surviving in such a challenging context. With this in mind, I reflect on how in the arpillera in Figure 11 women represent themselves as silenced subjects, while in the arpillera in Figure 12 below, women put themselves in the center, rebelling together and reclaiming their leadership in the struggle for justice, holding a flag that says 'rights'. I understand that both exclusion and political empowerment are part of the experiences of women affected by the dam.

**Figure 12 - arpillera 'women's political participation'**



Source: MAB Paraná 2014

## **4.7 Women Embroidering Resistance in Baixo Iguaçu**

This last section is dedicated to the exploration of the political use of arpilleras in Baixo Iguaçu. As mentioned, because the organized resistance in Baixo Iguaçu emerged when the dam was already under construction and the context demanded fast mobilization, the movement largely prioritized direct actions as a resistance mechanism. Arpilleras, as part of the tools used for popular education, occupied a secondary place. At the local reality of women affected by the Baixo Iguaçu dam, I observed that arpilleras are largely seen as a tool

<sup>70</sup> Ivone in personal interview, August 2019.

that comes from the outside, brought by coordinators of the MAB. The women do not have a strong ownership of the technique. Women's meetings for creating arpilleras only take place when the MAB's coordinators intentionally propose and organize them and are rarely replicated spontaneously in the communities I visited.

Arpilleras-workshops were, nevertheless, important for creating the space for women to meet as a group. The first meeting of affected women in the region was an arpilleras-workshop in 2014 with the participation of close to 50 women. According to the local coordinators, in a region so marked by patriarchal cultural patterns as the countryside of Paraná is, women are relegated to the realm of the private, the home. Therefore, creating a political space for women was a challenge. Arpilleras were helpful because embroidering and sewing are traditionally considered 'women's activities', and therefore were not initially regarded as political. The challenge then was, in the words of Nora, a local coordinator, to figure out "how to transform sewing into politics"<sup>71</sup>.

Figure 13 - local arpilleras-workshop



Source: MAB Paraná 2014

I found arpilleras to have a very relevant role for creating those political spaces for women, strengthening their collective identity as women affected by injustice and as *mulheres de luta* (women who resist). As put by Ana, a local coordinator, the debates that arpilleras generate and the resulting encouragement for women to participate in other resistance-spaces is the great political transformation that this tool has been promoting at the local level.

Through dialogues with local coordinators, I learnt that arpilleras and the *ciranda* (a circle of care for children) were two important moves adopted by the movement to include women and widen their political space. As mentioned, most of the women affected by the dam in Baixo Iguaçu that I encountered are mothers. Because their care responsibilities are one of the obstacles for them to participate, the MAB created the *ciranda* as a means to enable their participation. Likewise, according to Nora, "arpilleras are part of our *intentional* work for

<sup>71</sup> Nora in informal conversation, August 2019.

strengthening the participation of women”. Ana mentioned that for MAB Paraná and for women in different communities, arpilleras have shown a transformative potential because of their power of generating new debates and, as Lucia added, of showing that women can also be part of political spaces. Nora mentioned that in Baixo Iguaçu “more women got engaged in the struggle, especially young women”<sup>72</sup>.

As illustrated by Elza’s description of a local arpillera-workshop, this is a space where women can get together and talk about their struggles:

“we split up in small groups. Last time we were like 5 groups. So one group does one thing, the other does another. It’s only women that participate, men don’t come. And there we talk about the stories of the dam, what we have been through in these 6 years of struggles. So, so many stories. We discuss how to put those stories there [in the arpillera]. So we decide how to show that we fought this way and that way, here and there”.

Ivone expressed that engaging in a collective struggle was something completely new for her given that her community had little contact with social movements before the dam. For Ivone, the arpilleras helped women in moving from an individual way of thinking to a more collective one. She shared some reflections on her personal experience with arpilleras:

“I have participated more in women’s meetings, where I felt more confrontable. [...] Arpilleras for me are an experience of resistance. [...] For me it was something new, something I had never imagined: that someone could express their claims, their manifestations like this, putting on the cloth, on the fabric. [...] Making arpilleras is really good because we learn from what the Chilean women did and we can do it too, so it opens the way for us to find other ways to struggle, to claim, to denounce”.

Esmeralda described the process of discussing and deciding how to embroider the arpillera in Figure 14, that shows women holding their ‘struggle’ flag, resisting the exploitation of their river by the ‘monsters’ that extract money from it:

“making arpilleras raises discussion among us. Because we have to think about what we’re going to *draw* [in the arpillera]. At a meeting I said: ‘[...] I would put the affected people fighting, I don’t know how, but fighting against monsters: Iberdrola, Copel and Neoenergia’. So then talking with the group, thinking on how to represent us fighting, we decided to use a flag”<sup>73</sup>.

<sup>72</sup> Ana, Lucia and Nora in personal interviews, August 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Esmeralda in personal interview, August 2019.



Figure 14 - arpillera created by women in Baixo Iguaçu, yet to be finished.



Source: fieldwork, Francisco Beltrão, August 2019

The letter written by the women that created this arpillera explains that they represented their collective resistance to the transformation of their river into a source of profit by capital power<sup>74</sup>. I suggest in conclusion that women affected by dams are connected by their common experiences of struggle, dispossession and silencing, and the space for embroidering arpilleras offers the possibility of collectively breaking the silences and reinventing their realities which are marked by “a history that has undervalued and marginalized them leaving them confined to a place of subordination”<sup>75</sup> (García-Torres 2017: ix). In those spaces, subordination and vulnerability are “not repressed and denied but rather embraced as a form of strength and courage. The power of tears creates openings in which enforced silence can become active voice” (Motta and Esteves 2014: 16). Mobilizing collectively, holding a flag that says *LUTA* (struggle), women resist the neoliberal, patriarchal, colonial and racist energy development model that oppress them in multiple ways, struggling for justice.

<sup>74</sup> Letter of the arpillera in Figure 13, MAB Paraná 2019.

<sup>75</sup> My translation.

## Chapter 5 | Conclusion

In concluding this RP, I would like to return to the words of Celia on the assassination of the river. ‘The river flowed, the river had life’, she said, and it was killed. Her words made me reflect on the commodification of natures in the current ‘apocalyptic phase of capital’, to use Rita Segato’s expression. A river that “flows wandering and unpredictable” is captured by a “pedagogy of cruelty” that installs in its place the “sterility of the thing, measurable, marketable” (Segato 2018: 11). Trying to understand how the practice of murdering rivers and flooding lives around Brazil for the installation of giant dams is legitimized through development discourses and how it is experienced and resisted on the ground was part of what drove me to undertake this research.

These discourses on hydropower development are clearly neither ahistorical nor apolitical but imbued with power and have material effects as they crystallize in practices (Escobar 1995). The discourses that resulted in the construction of a sixth dam for hydropower production in the Iguaçu River comprise: supposedly scientific, objective and apolitical truths, ‘views from nowhere’, about hydropower development as a green, clean and responsible alternative for energy production; developmentalist narratives cantered on the idea of national interests, growth and progress; and promises of employment generation, poverty alleviation and local development. Powerful propagandistic mechanisms are used to foster hydropower development and to silence the voices of those most severely affected by the projects. The result is the construction of a hegemonic discourse that sustains the idea that damming a river for energy production is legitimate, beneficial for everyone, and the only possible system; the only way. Oppositions to this discourse, are delegitimized – treated as irrational acts and obstacles to development – silenced and criminalized.

My purpose in this research has been to explore how women that inhabit the lands affected by the sixth hydropower dam built in the Iguaçu River embroider their embodied, emotional and daily resistance. My initial aspiration was to focus on their resistance through *arpilleras*. However, when engaging with these women, I understood that *arpilleras* are just one of the different forms of resistance that their struggles encompass, and thus I realized that I needed to go beyond *arpilleras*, because only talking about *arpilleras* or only seeing the resistance through them will not deal with the silences, the stories that they do not tell, and would thus romanticize and objectify the experiences of women in Baixo Iguaçu. *Arpilleras* were one part of this investigation as guides, as metaphors, and as *subjects* of analysis. I sought to analyze the meanings attributed to this tool of resistance that resignifies sewing, transforming it into a political act, and its potentials for promoting change.

Women affected by the Baixo Iguaçu dam resisted as members of an organized and collective struggle in the MAB, strongly and proudly engaged in direct actions and mobilizations with their families and communities for the defense of their lands and their rights. Beyond their organized resistances, their daily struggles were and still are struggles for surviving displacement, health problems, the destruction of their communities, family ties and care networks, the flooding of their lands, the violent sexist stigmatization of their political engagement, and their exclusion from spaces of negotiation and decision-making. They are resisting multiple intersecting oppressions.

I understand that *arpilleras* are a tool that traverses their resistances, coming from an intentional and organized project of the MAB, and offering them an alternative language to reflect on their emotions and experiences, question their oppressions and express their political messages. *Arpilleras* are particularly relevant for creating more room for women in

the movement, acknowledging differences, generating debates and the construction of a collective identity.

What the local groups of women organized in the MAB, along the Iguazu River and the dozens of other dammed rivers, and at the national level of the MAB's collective of women are doing with arpilleras is political. Their arpilleras-project is an example of a political use of art within a social movement. What emerges is a possibility for a feminist popular pedagogic practice. It is about women affected by dams telling their own stories through a form of expression that goes beyond the verbal language. It is part of a struggle for widening women's political spaces of participation. That way, and as Esther said, an arpillera of women affected by dams is more than "a work of art that is made by political activists, it is a political strategy that uses art". What makes an arpillera political is its potential to transform power relations<sup>76</sup>.

I see the use of arpilleras by women in the MAB as a counter-hegemonic project, a way of generating alternatives to dominant narratives. They work as a tool of resistance in this 'apocalyptic phase of capital', in a 'world of owners'. This is a world that needs a pedagogy of cruelty for creating 'non-empathetic personalities', people incapable 'of putting themselves in the place of others' (Segato 2018: 79). In that sense, arpilleras of women affected by dams can be seen as working as a counter-pedagogy-of-cruelty. As counter-hegemonic purposes that rise up to challenge dominant narratives and imagine alternatives.

I would like to finish with my personal reflection on the challenges of traversing this research journey and thinking through my ethical commitments. This research was for me a process of learning and unlearning, of constantly questioning myself the whats, whys, wheres, and hows of my engagement with a political struggle. Questioning the location from where I think and act in this academic practice. Questioning my entanglement with power relations. Searching the ways in which I can *walk with* the women of the MAB in the struggle against a neoliberal, patriarchal, colonial and racist energy development model, a struggle for social justice. I believe this is just the beginning of my walk.

<sup>76</sup> Esther in personal interview, August 2019.

## Appendix 1: List of Interviews

Pseudonym	Who?	Where?	When? (in 2019)
Elza	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 8
Esmeralda	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 13
Ezequiel	<i>Atingido</i> Baixo Iguaçu, guide 1	Capanema/ Realeza	August 6; 7; 8
Leo	<i>Atingido</i> Baixo Iguaçu, guide 2	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 8; 13; 14
Cecilia	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Francisco Beltrão	August 12
Celia	<i>Atingida</i> Itá	Marmeleiro	August 9
Cleusa	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capanema	August 6
Jaqueline	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Realeza	August 7
Diana	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Realeza	August 7
Meri	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 14
Mirta	<i>Atingida</i> Itá	Marmeleiro	August 15
Silvio	<i>Atingido</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capanema	August 6
Taís	MAB's national coordinator	Phone call	June 5
Rose	MAB's national coordinator	São Paulo	July 23
Ana	MAB's local coordinator	Francisco Beltrão	August 5; 16
Nora	MAB's local coordinator	Francisco Beltrão	August 5
Ivone	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 8
Beatriz	MAB's urban activist	Francisco Beltrão	August 6
Lucia	MAB's local coordinator	Francisco Beltrão	August 12
Luis	Director ASESORAR	Francisco Beltrão	August 15
Aline	MAB's urban activist	Florianópolis	August 1
Bruna	MAB's urban activist	Florianópolis	August 1
Esther Vital <sup>77</sup>	One of the creators of MAB's arpilleras project	Ubatuba	July 21; 22
Adriane Canan <sup>78</sup>	One of the directors of the arpilleras film	Florianópolis	July 29
Alberto	<i>Atingido</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 8
Carlos	<i>Atingido</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 14
Sabrina	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 14
Celso	<i>Atingido</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 13
Oscar	MAB's local coordinator	Francisco Beltrão	August 9
Josy	<i>Atingida</i> Baixo Iguaçu	Capitão Leônidas Marques	August 14
Leticia	MAB's activist	Francisco Beltrão	August 16

<sup>77</sup> real name

<sup>78</sup> real name



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