

Riverine Women after Resettlement

The Case of the Belo Monte Hydropower Dam Project

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Abstract

The construction of Belo Monte Hydropower dam has resettled riverine communities from their homes to the outskirts of the city of Altamira, kilometres away and disconnected from the river. Resettlement can be a threat to both women and men's adaptation in the new environment, whereas the lack of in-depth studies regarding gender policies and local traditional communities can create even more obstacles for women. The disconnection that stems the resettlement from these individuals has resulted in the loss of their spatial identity and livelihood. This situation caused local traditional people to share resettlement units with city dwellers, thereby jeopardising their traditions and distancing them from both the river and their livelihood.

Keywords

Traditional riverine settlements, resettlement, gender, riverine, livelihood, tradition

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Introduction

This paper explores the impact of resettlement on a Brazilian riverine community, with a particular focus on the women, following a move in to the outskirts of the city of Altamira, as a result of the construction of Belo Monte Hydropower dam, the third biggest hydropower dam in the world (de Sousa & Reid, 2010). The data, gathered over the course of two field studies in 2018 and 2020, shows how riverine women's lives shifted after such resettlement. It further illustrates how several layers of their livelihood have been transformed in the wake of this environmental change and how they are adapting to their current living situation. For this study the same families were interviewed during both field studies, inside their homes in the Collective Urban Resettlement - CUR. This enabled me to understand how these individuals adapted over the years and how much of their tradition had been lost. I will be guiding this paper to answer this research question:

What has changed in riverine women's relationships with their traditional living spaces and with their personal connections, environmental and social, after resettlement in a CUR, considering the resulting disconnection from the river and their livelihood?

Who are the riverine people?

In the 1800s, workers from the north-eastern part of Brazil came to the Amazon looking for work in the rubber industry. When the rubber period was over, men and women created a way of living from the natural resources found in the forest and river, mixing indigenous and traditional knowledge (De Francesco et al., 2017). Currently, the riverine people are found living along riverbanks and on islands in Brazilian rivers; many are isolated and have no contact with the neighbouring cities (Fechine, 2012). Traditional people, including the riverine people, were recognised by the Brazilian Constitution only as of 2007, from which time their culture has been officially considered part of the national heritage (Brasil, 2007; Lopes, 2013). Today, the riverine people, also known as '*povos das águas*' (people of water) (Khouri, 2013; Yousef Filho, 2015) have a strong relationship to the rivers and the forest. This 'invisible' group of people found throughout the dense forest live sustainably, in very intimate contact with the natural environment (De Francesco et al., 2017; Khouri, 2013). Factors such as the river tide and annual season, knowledge of when to plant crops, which fish to catch, and where and when to hunt (De Francesco et al., 2017) also have a strong influence on the riverine culture (Lopes, 2013).

A traditional riverine settlement, for many riverine families in the Middle Xingu region, comprises two houses, one alongside the river or island and another in the city (Magalhaes, 2017; Costa e Silva & Lucas, 2019) (see Figure 1). The reason for maintaining two homes is to have access to public services, the healthcare system, and the educational system (Instituto Socioambiental, 2015; De Francesco et al., 2017). Although there are schools alongside the river offering education for children up to 10 years of age, most mothers move to the city with the children for further education (Parente & Lopes, 2017); others find it easier to take their children to the city on a daily basis (De Francesco et al., 2017). De Francesco et al. (2017) explained that the urban houses are built by these individuals, mostly from stilts, and are located along the streams in the city or on the river, close to the city centre and public services to facilitate access to these services (see Figure 2).

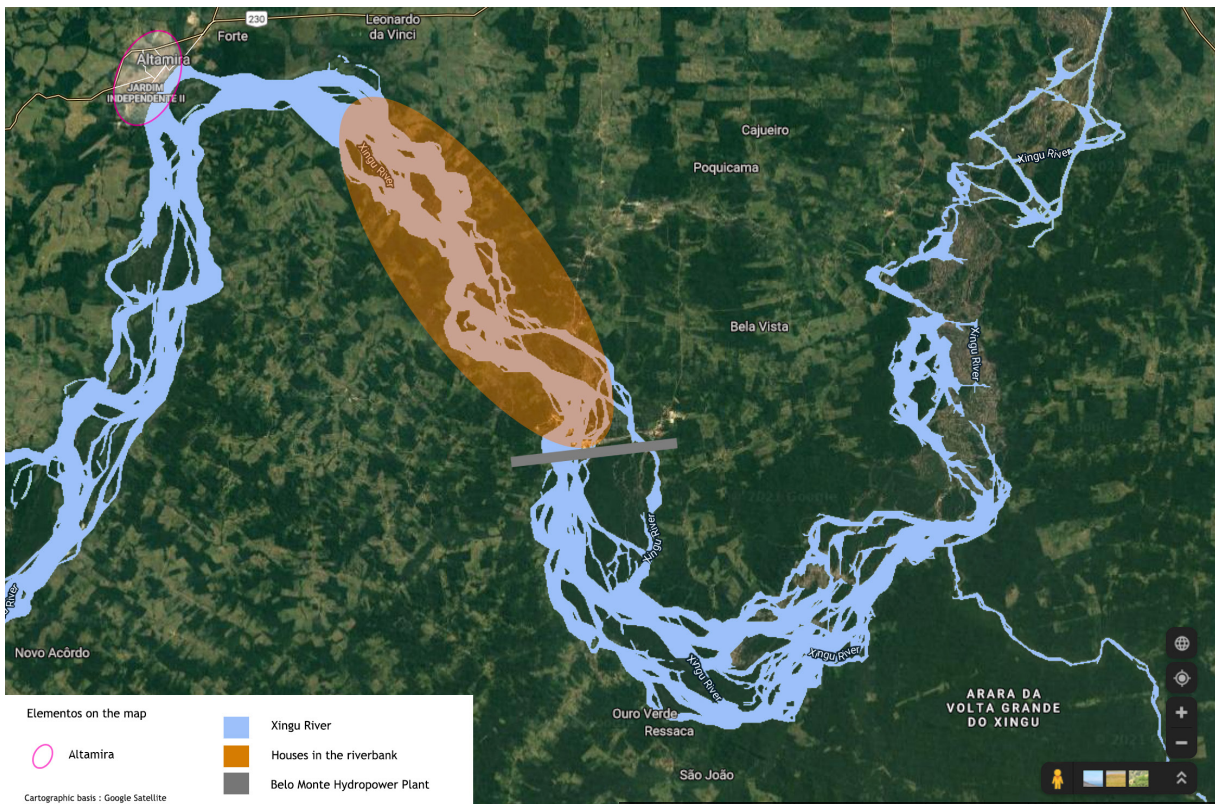


FIGURE 1 Map of Xingu River and Altamira | This map shows the location of the dam and where the riverine families lived before the reservoir.



FIGURE 2 Stilt houses along the Xingu River | Photo taken from the city of Altamira of the stilt houses along the Xingu River (2015)

Riverine communities survive on collective support. The families who are part of these communities live off subsistence activities, where sharing and exchanging of goods and services is common among the people (Khouri, 2013). This mindset extends even to taking care for one another's children when needed (De Francesco et al., 2017). To obtain some capital income, the families also sell goods grown on their land or fish from the river at the city's local market (De Francesco et al., 2017; Khouri, 2013). As Kuokkanen (2011: 218) clarified, "(...) subsistence activities are an expression of one's identity, culture, and values. They are also a means by which social networks are maintained and reinforced." This movement is created with trust built over time between people. Kuokkanen (2011: 218) continued, "Subsistence is both an economic and a social system, encompassing various spheres of life that often are inseparable from one another. It is characterized by endless circulation of goods, services, (...) and other activities which provide income in kind—food, heat, clothing, shelter, and a variety of other subsistence good and services." The abundant availability of natural resources found in the riverine people's environment meets all the families' and community's necessity for controlled and structured production within their immediate surroundings. The relationship between the natural environment and the people differs depending on experiences (Castro-Diaz, 2018; Agarwal, 1996), cultural roles (Agarwal, 1996), gender, age, class, and occupation (Castro-Diaz, 2018).

Resettlement and Gender

Resettlement is a decision made by authorities, which no opportunity for negotiation is available to those affected (de Sherbinin et al., 2010). Fernando et al. (2009:2) summarized resettlement as "... a response to displacement, or involuntary forced migration, where people move because of an external shock—whether it be a development project, a natural disaster, or civil conflict." Many communities experience trauma, especially those who have had their livelihoods disrupted (Dwivedi, 2002) and have been disempowered (Mehta, 2009). Homogeneous and gender-blind policies make it harder for women to adapt to the new environment (Asthana, 2012). Apart from that, when policies are gender sensitive, they mostly apply to women who are mothers (Moser, 2012), despite the documented need for such policies during the resettlement process (Mehta, 2009). The aftermath of development-induced displacement reinforces the disadvantaged position of women (Terminski, 2013).

The lack of policies, funding, political motivation, careful execution, and monitoring (van Eerd, 2017) after resettlement weakens women's adaptation and decreases opportunities in the new environment (Asthana, 2012). As affirmed by Asthana (2012), the patriarchal culture tends to create spatial limitations, thereby preventing women from rebuilding their livelihoods. Subordinate positioning decreases women's practical ability to earn a living and increases concern over the family's well-being (Mayoux, 1995). It also strengthens the unequal divisions of labour, increasing the lack of autonomy that governs women's quality of life.

Resettling Riverine People

Norte Energia S.A., the company responsible for the construction of the Belo Monte Hydropower dam, along with the mitigation and compensation programmes, have registered 20,000 people affected by the reservoir (Hernandez-Ruz, 2018; Randell, 2016), but only 4% from the riverbank have chosen resettlement as compensation (Instituto Socioambiental, 2015). Every household located below the level of 100m was registered and offered compensation to leave their homes due to the permanent flooding, not only those living alongside the river but also in nearby cities such as Altamira and Vitoria do Xingu (Randell, 2016;

Eletronbras, 2009). The resettlement process started in 2012–2013 (Instituto Socioambiental, 2015). Riverine families received money as compensation for their riverbank house or credit (Randell, 2016), but for the urban houses, families were able to choose between money, new housing, or credit compensation.

The Collective Urban Resettlements - CURs, in which alternative housing offered as compensation is located, are found on the outskirts of the city of Altamira. Some sites are three kilometres away from the river, whereas others are kilometres away (Instituto Socioambiental, 2015). Four of the five CURs are located up the hill, away from the river, and all five are far from the city centre (see Figure 3). Altamira is a city that does not offer regular public transportation, which isolates the resettled population even more.

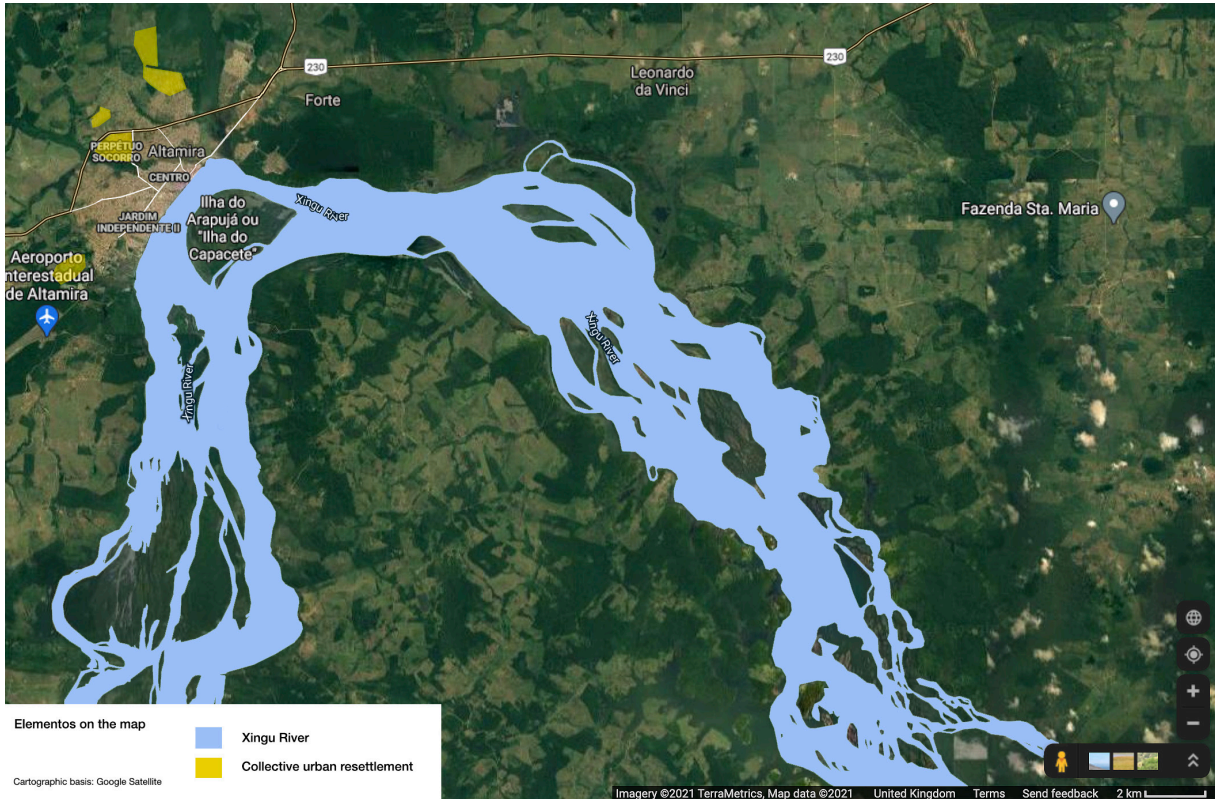


FIGURE 3 Maps indicating the location of the city of the CURs | Adapted by author from Costa e Silva and Lucas, 2019

This distance of the CURs has impacted both riverine men and women’s work and daily routines, access to the river and public services, with the overall effect on each gender being different. As Terminski (2013) confirmed, the aftermath of development-induced displacement reinforces the disadvantaged position of women and strengthens the household roles.

Research shows that women’s relationship to the environment, to practices, to knowledge, to management, to needs and to priorities is different from men’s (Castro-Diaz, 2018; Agarwal, 1997). In a riverine household, it is common to see women being the ones responsible for the internal affairs and men responsible for outside activities (Silva et al., 2010; da Silva et al., 2011), reinforcing women’s connections to the environment and the community, which are very different from those of men. As Women’s Environment & Development Organization & United Nations Foundation (2004, p.50) have cited, “Many invest great vigour and energy into ensuring the day-to-day survival of their families and community.” Within the riverine

community dynamics, women are responsible for the lighter physical tasks, whereas men bear the heavier burdens. For example, men cut down the trees and prepare the lumber for house building, and women oversee medicinal plants and the plants surrounding the home (Fechine, 2008).

Data Collection

The data for this research was gathered through a field study at the beginning of 2018, over the course of nearly three months, and then again in early 2020 for a month and a half. During both of these field studies, I participated in activities with the riverine community, engaged in meetings, interviewed both men and women inside their houses in the CUR, spent a week with two different families, participated in an expedition in the forest with riverine men and members of NGOs, and talked to employees of various NGOs and federal departments. I conducted 21 in-depth interviews with riverine peoples to understand their stories, the resettlement process, and their current life situation within their urban resettlement. Fourteen of the 21 interviewees were women, seven were men, and I was also able to conduct interviews with riverine couples. I used the going-along method to learn about the CUR and the changes that occurred in the natural environment. I also had an opportunity to go to the river with some riverine people to understand how their life was before the dam was constructed and the current challenges they face. This method, as Carpiano (2009: 236) quoted, “is a variation on qualitative interviewing techniques that has a great utility for exploring – and subsequently improving understanding of – people’s experiences of their local residential context (...) place and space (...) not only neighbourhood environment, but the larger local area in which a neighbourhood may be part and in which people move about in conducting their activities or practices.” This method has enabled me to broaden my understanding of people’s histories, their environment, their relationship to the river, and the impacts on their livelihood and social relationships.

The oral interviews were recorded and transcribed, and during the field work, a daily diary was kept. Most of the interviewees were illiterate but were very good storytellers; their past and present are told in detail. Oral interviews empower people who are voiceless and enabled me to receive information from unexplored territory (da Silva & Junior, 2012). Embracing what Alberti (2004:14 – translated by the author) cited, “It is the experience of a person as treated: his narrative ends up colouring the past with the value that is dear to us: one that makes man a unique and singular individual in our history, a subject who actually lived.” During the interviews, I was able to capture feelings, histories, and details on the previous and current living situations and memories. I also heard myths that have moulded the riverine people’s daily lives and beliefs. All this information allowed me to obtain a deep understanding of their past and present with more clarity. All the names in this paper have been changed with the purpose of protecting people’s identities.

Findings

To better understand how the riverine families lived before the dam came into the picture, Ana de Francesco, an anthropologist from an NGO Instituto Socioambiental- ISA, explained how a house in the riverbank is perceived by a riverine person: A house is not only the constructed building; it is the space around the house of an extended radius of not just one hectare but greater than 20 hectares (personal communication, 2018). This space has to offer fruit trees, medicinal plants, space for the family crops (Costa e Silva & Lucas, 2019) (see Figure 4), a hunting area, and river areas for fishing and leisure. One riverine woman, Mrs. Mariana (personal communication, 2018), explained:

"It is from it that we make our living, what we need to survive. (...). In our (urban) houses, we have walls or limits of our homes, while in nature that does not exist, and the usage of space is greater than what is created by the infrastructure."

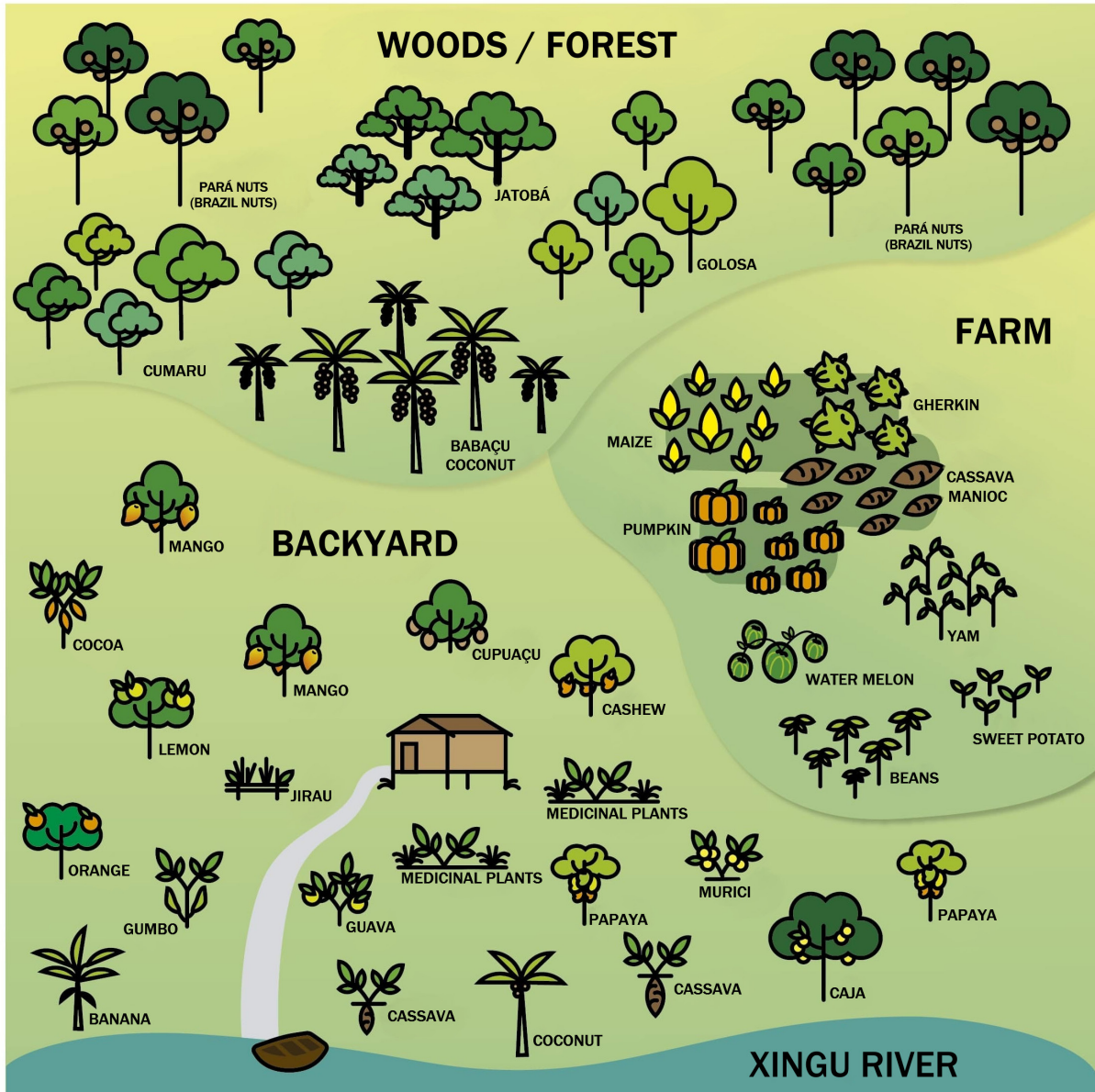


FIGURE 4 Illustration of a riverine's home | This image shows how a riverine house is set up surrounded by natural resources utilized by the family. (Costa e Silva & Lucas, 2019).

The 'people of waters' relationship with the river reflects itself in many layers of the riverine people's daily life, from transportation to income, social network, and traditions. The location occupied by each family holds history, not only as a place where one grows their food or hunts, but also where the community members gather for annual parties, exchange goods, and bury their family members. The meaning of place is a combination of people, places, activities, and memories (Papmehl-Dufay, 2015). During the expedition, the riverine guiding the work explained that before building their homes in such places, it is important

to first analyse the quality of the soil for crop growing, as well as determining the trees available for the construction and maintenance of their houses and what the trees could offer to the family, whether there are wild animals, and if the location was close to their family and friends. The occupancy of each land is acknowledged by the riverine and respected. If that land has an existing owner, then the new family cannot settle there, or should ask for permission to occupy a space, for example. Similarly, the houses in the city or the space made available for construction of the houses are also analysed before occupancy, with the most important factor being closeness to the river, where access is easy (see Figure 5).



FIGURE 5 Map | The map shows the location of the CURs and the previous location of the riverine urban houses before resettlement.

A riverine woman explained that she owned a piece of land along the stream close to the city centre, which she shared with both her daughters and their families. This land had a small house and a two-storey wooden house. After months of negotiation, her family was able to receive two houses in the same unit. Today, this riverine woman lives close to one of her daughters but not to the other. The daughter living further away rented a house with her husband and children in another CUR. All three women have stopped working because of the distance to the river and the lack of regular public transport. Before resettlement, they had fished and sold their catch at the city market, while the women also took turns taking care of the children each day.

Because of the long distance between the CURs, family members are now distanced from each other; they are not able to help each other as before. As a riverine woman, Mrs. Flor, said:

"I rarely see my sister; she lives very far [in another CUR] and it is hard to get there. Before, we used to see each other all the time, every day. Today, I must take two buses, which takes around an hour on each bus only one way."

Due to the distance of the CURs, the riverine people must walk approximately two hours from the river to their homes. To be able to work, they must pay for private transportation to take their boat's motor, isotope box, pans, hammocks, and many other items to the river for work. Every woman interviewed, with the exception of two, decided to sell their boats since this situation was not logistically nor financially viable. This has resulted in the women staying at home while the men become the main supporters of the household.

Additionally, due to the distance to the river and the rising violence in the CURs, women are the ones staying home to take care of the house (see Figure 6). The lack of family and social connections, coupled with the violence, is forcing women to stay inside their houses, thereby strengthening their dependency on men and their roles, defined by the duties understood to be women's under the patriarchal culture, within the household (Asthana, 2012). Apart from this dependency, many couples argue that the dam has also driven them apart. In the middle Xingu, it was traditional for the riverine couples to work together, whether it was fishing or farming. Today, the men are working alone, with the women staying inside taking care of the children and the house. The low count of fish in the Xingu River (Val et al., 2016; Castro-Diaz et al., 2018) has contributed negatively to the riverine families' income and food security and prolongs the day's men stay away from home because of work. Mrs. Francisca and Mr. Leo said that they used to work together, but now because she must stay home, they spend weeks apart.



FIGURE 6 Riverine woman | Riverine woman in front of her house in the Collective Urban Resettlement (CUR), 2018.

Another tradition that has changed with the dam is the subsistence economy that was adopted by the riverine community, which allowed families to help each other; this is not as common today. If a household produced more crops than needed, the rest would be offered to the neighbours. If there was more food than the community could consume, it would be taken to the city to sell in the local market. Today, the families are not able to farm, therefore they buy what they eat and due to the lack of fish, the consumption

of canned meat and beef has increased. This low count of fish in the river has resulted in many families discovering hunger and poverty for the first time. Before the dam, the riverine people did not consider themselves poor because the food was abundant, and they felt no necessity for more. Now, due to the low count of fish, these families must choose which bill to pay each month.

Mrs. Mariana and Mr. Jose, a riverine couple (personal communication, 2020), described how their Christmas and family events were before the dam:

"We used to invite our neighbours because we had a table full of food; it was a feast. The entire family and friends. But now, after Belo Monte, we are very poor. This year, we had a few dishes on the table and could not invite anyone. It is hard because now we don't have money to buy anything, and the fish we catch now are very small and very few."



FIGURE 7 Riverine woman |Riverine woman showing the extension built from her house in the Collective Urban Resettlement (CUR), 2018.

According to all the interviewees, lifestyle and quality of life have changed, even with respect to the comfort of their houses. A riverine house normally has three rooms (bedroom, living room, and kitchen), but many have only one room (Fechine, 2012), with a strong structure to hang the hammocks. Both riverside and city houses were not as comfortable, but, as many said, it was peaceful there. Today, the windows and doors of the houses in the CUR have grids. Every family interviewed had a wooden extension on the back of the house (see Figure 7). The extensions were either rooms for family members or somewhere to keep their extra furniture and fishing equipment. Every family, except for one, said they felt unsafe once they moved into their new house, especially because of the slab which is an element they are not used to. Mrs. Ilma (personal communication, 2018), confirmed:

"I don't trust these walls and this slab. I think it will fall on me at any day, so I built an extension of wood on the back, this way I can sleep well, in colder temperature, and on my hammock."

Conclusion

The lack of opportunities available for riverine women after resettlement have strengthened men's roles within the family. This dependency on men has increased due to many elements that accord for the first time in these women's lives: the violence in the CURs that mean someone must always be home and the women are the ones selected for this task; the impossible daily work routines due to the distance to the river; and the isolation from city centre due to complicated and irregular public transportation. Family members that used to live nearby, and see and help each other daily, are now meeting once or twice a month due to the distance between the CURs and the poor public transportation. The lack of reliable, affordable, and regular public transportation has disconnected riverine women from the river and natural environment, isolating them in the outskirts of the city. The location not only affected women's lives but also that of the couple. Today, due to the previously cited factors, the couple are not able to work together as is traditionally common, but the men go to the river alone.

Currently, the riverine traditions and connection to the river are diminishing. Riverine families are not involved with their traditional space, have been disconnected from their livelihood and spend weeks without seeing the river. Their lifestyle, which before was surrounded by nature and intricately linked to the natural environment, is now away from nature, between houses. When living closer to the river, their main concern was about the tide of the river, cleaning of the boat, the crops and what type of fish they would like to catch that day. Their habits are slowly changing to those more common to an urban lifestyle, where the main concerns are about earning income and protecting the house from burglars.

This article comes from ongoing PhD research, which is due to be completed. My suggestion for future research on resettled riverine women is to compare how other countries have compensated and considered their traditional population with regard to development-induced displacement and respect for their traditions. It is important to maintain the riverine population along the riverbank, since they are the protectors of the forest and rivers.

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