

Gender in Global and Regional Trade Policy: Contrasting Views
and New Research.

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Vehicle for Women's Empowerment

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THE WOMEN BABASSU BREAKERS

It is within the context of the impoverished North East of Brazil that we find an ever-inspiring example of human endurance, community spirit and political vision in the struggle of the women babassu breakers. Babassu is a wild palm which grows in the transition forest around the Amazon belt. All parts of the babassu are useful. The outer hard shell is turned into charcoal for fuel, the soft, fibrous inner shell makes a nutritious porridge and the kernels are turned into oil which goes into margarine, cooking oil, soaps and some of the multinational cosmetics company The Body Shop's cosmetics. The women, known as the babassu breakers, are those women who gather the fallen nuts of the palm from the forest floor and break their hard shells by hitting them with a large club on the up-turned blade of an axe. Gaining access to the fruits of the palm, which grows on large extensions of forest owned by powerful land barons, was the cause of bitter and bloody social conflict in the 1980's. It was the women who spear-headed the campaign to "liberate" the babassu. They won - but not without the loss of over a thousand lives. Today, the women have the legal right to the fruits of the babassu palm. Their struggle to secure access to a natural resource which gives them a livelihood is also about the preservation of the forest. The land-owners are more interested in clearing the forest for cattle-grazing. By gaining the legal right to the fruits of the babassu, the women have become guardians of the forest, a role of which they are deeply proud.

“Hey, don’t chop down this palm tree!
Hey, don’t devour these palm groves!
You know you can’t chop them down
We have to preserve our natural resources.”¹

Ludovico is a tiny settlement in the Maranhão state, and home to some of the founders of the COPPALJ co-operative. It is here that we can find the living example of how it is, through the combination of increased economic control and organisational strength, that

¹ A verse from the free translation of the babassu breakers’ hymn: “Cry of the babassu breakers”

trade can, indeed, act as a vehicle for social change and has led to the empowerment of women.

The co-operative, which is dedicated to the marketing of babassu nuts and oil is made up of several communities. It was born out of the conflict of the 1980's when a coalition of NGOs and trade unions created ASSEMA, an Association of Settlers of the State of Maranhão. ASSEMA is made up of four co-operatives, COPPALJ being one. ASSEMA is a sort of hybrid between an NGO, having a team of technicians who support the co-operatives in their marketing, organisational strengthening, agricultural techniques etc., and a confederation of the four co-operatives. The Board's membership is made up of representatives from all four co-operatives, all of which have "liberated" directors who are temporarily seconded from their communities to spend time in ASSEMA's offices to take part in running the organisation and learn the tricks of the trade.

The women babassu breakers within ASSEMA's radius of activity formed their own organisation, the AMTR, (the Association of Women Rural Workers), who are also represented on the Board of ASSEMA

“A woman on her feet ceases to be so scared
Be courageous, take my hand
We will struggle together with courage and with love
For the government to recognise this, our profession.”²

When COPPALJ gained its first access to an export market with The Body Shop in 1995, it was in some considerable financial difficulties. The co-operative had built up a number of debts which it was unable to pay off. Its situation was compounded by the collapse of the national market in babassu oil due to the import of cheap Malaysian palm oil. . In August 1992 a joint venture was initiated between the Malaysian state company

² A verse from the free translation of the babassu breakers' hymn: “Cry of the babassu breakers”

Felda Marketing Corporation and the Brazilian trading company Welkin Comercial Ltda, to import palm oil and rubber into Brazil and other Latin American countries.³ The liberalisation of the Brazilian economy and the facilities offered to foreign investors, together with an expansion of the use of soya oil in the food industry and detergents, posed a serious threat to the babassu economy. The situation was bleak. However, due to the organisational capacity and political insight of the co-operative on the one hand and the commitment of The Body Shop to the relationship on the other, the Cooperative was able to weather the storm and build a successful business. The impact of the trading relationship has brought about social transformations and delivered benefits to the wider communities.

On the economic front, the results of the Cooperative's significantly improved returns on the oil operation allowed the co-operative to clear down its debts, improve the physical infrastructure of the oil press and increase its working capital. This in turn meant that the co-operative's improved cash flow allowed the babassu breakers to be paid cash on delivery to the co-operative-owned community shops, the collection points for the babassu nuts and the source of basic food stuffs. The shops were able to carry a greater variety of groceries and stay open for longer hours as the shop keepers could be paid for the hours worked. Some of the community shop buildings which had been no more than mud huts were replaced by more resistant structures. The co-operative truck was able to stay on the road and provide a more regular pick up, delivery and transportation service to the remote and largely inaccessible communities, essential for the transportation of the nuts to the oil press, delivery of basic groceries to the communities and the provision of a basic passenger service. More importantly, the co-operative was able to offer a fixed price for its babassu nuts to both members and non-members which had a stabilising effect on nut prices in the region.

³Alfredo Wagner Berno de Almeida Carajas: A Guerra dos Mapas

CHANGING THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The economic benefits were wide-ranging, but not necessarily as significant as the political consequences of the co-operative's enhanced economic power. Those who had traditionally held an economic and political stranglehold on the communities – the sharks, the middlemen, found they had suddenly lost their grip. The co-operative became the key player in the region not only in relation to the purchase of babassu nuts which, it must be emphasised, continues to be the key currency, but also in terms of the general exchange of goods – basic groceries. The political economy of babassu in the region experienced a significant shift. Suddenly the co-operative was a force to be reckoned with. ASSEMA became recognised as an exporter and was invited to participate in regional conferences. Confidence in the oil operation was boosted and the co-operative became an example of "success" in the region. More importantly, there was renewed faith in the co-operative itself by its membership. The whole organisation became stronger. COPPALJ paid a margin to ASSEMA, its NGO partner, for the technical services received in exporting the oil. This put the relationship on a new footing: the co-operative was contributing towards the technical support it received. Of greater significance was the enhanced status of the women babassu breakers. Although it had been the women's idea to start up an oil press in the first place, it was only when the press started to make a profit that they received recognition for their vision. But the most important shift in perception was in the recognition of their labour as work which made a significant contribution to the livelihoods of their families – not as something marginal or peripheral – but as central to the domestic and regional economy. The women themselves grew in strength – both personally and politically.

The question of how they could receive a greater return for their work brought about debates on gender within the co-operative's meetings. The women began to demand attention to their position. Gender was firmly on the co-operative's agenda and in the

consciousness of the women and the men with new meaning. A new dynamic in gender relations had been released within the community, one which continues to be played out.