

Brazil's Unique Health System or What It Means to be Poor.

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The Story of D.

D. had just married and expected her first child. Born and raised as one of twelve children in the forests of Rio Cariá in the depths of the Amazon she had been lucky to receive some basic education and, with her 25 years, was comparatively old to expect her first child. She had just recovered from two painful abscesses in her breast and prepared herself for a quiet pregnancy.

She had completed all pre-natal exams in the interior, but came to the village São Sebastião da Boa Vista to have her child. Women of her family often had problems giving natural birth, so D. did not want to take any chances. When the pain started she went to the local hospital, where they measured her perineum and told her to return the other day. The next day she was sent home again, although the pains were already unbearable. It was not until Friday, two days later, that she first saw a doctor who assured her she would be able to have her child naturally, probably by dawn. The doctor left orders to call him in case of any complications and left. D. stayed, forced to walk along the halls of the hospital as there was no bed for her.

D. walked all night. Crying with pain and exasperation. When she called a nurse for help, he merely informed her that "This is what giving birth is like."

Finally at least he asked the daughter of another patient to take another measurement. Never mind that the women had no medical formation whatsoever. She just happened to be there. Later, D. was left alone again. "I thought, I'd die right there, alone on the concrete floor," she remembers.

Distraction came at five a.m. when another woman entered the hospital and was sent walking. Desperate, she ran to the toilet, her mother pleading with the nurse to attend her daughter. The nurse, however, told her he had taken a measurement and there was another half-inch missing, so to leave him alone. When he finally furiously ceded to the woman's insistence and entered the room, the baby already hung above the toilet sink. The pregnant woman was taken away to complete the process. D. was left alone again.

Saturday morning, 6:30 a.m., staff change and another nurse arriving. This time it was an acquaintance of D's family and shocked to see his friend in agony. He asked his colleague to call the doctor, but nobody had his number. So he sent her to a bed and told her to press. After three days without food and water (none was given to her), however, D. was too weak to exert any pressure. Another nurse decided thus the only way to save her and the baby was to "cut her up." That was when D.'s acquaintance was called away. His colleague started cutting and asked another guy (D. still does not know whether this young man was a nurse or not) to exert maximum pressure on her belly.

Which he did, almost jumping on it. D. realized blood streaming from her ear; then she lost consciousness. She never saw the baby they finally pulled out. Considering the black and blue marks D. had all over her belly and arms when she awoke, however, she has a pretty good idea about the cause of her son's death.

About the work of CNS women

The National Council of Rubber Tappers (Conselho Nacional dos Seringueiros – CNS) is the social movement of the traditional non-indigenous population in the Brazilian Amazon. Founded in 1985 by Chico Mendes and his companions, CNS has dedicated its entire existence to the creation and promotion of Extractivist Reserves (RESEX), protected areas in which communities work and live according to sustainable use plans in harmony with the rainforest.

All of CNS' members and representatives are directly from the RESEX, thus making it a true grassroots movement.

In 1995, the grand lady of the movement of coconut breakers, Dona Raimunda dos Cocos, established the women's secretariat within CNS to strengthen women's participation and rights both within the movement and in the public political sphere. The secretariat's first great success was the documentation campaign, providing women – for the first time – with personal documents necessary to receive civil rights and government support.

Since 2004, the project „The Baggage of the Forest Women“ has trained more than 40 women educators in health education, who in turn have held more than 150 workshops on STD/AIDS prevention, family planning, women's health and women's rights. Always working with the entire community, men, women and children. Applying games, songs and local rituals to animate and strengthen a population that barely knows how to read or write.

The project has been expanded to cover other issues such as communication and nutrition. One of the results of the activities is an increase in reports of abuse and negligence by entities of the public health system.