

# Zenilda da Silva Vilacio

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**Zenilda da Silva Vilacio** talked with Janet Smith



Photo by Janet Smith

‘Until I became involved with the indigenous movement I was living in a dream,’ recalls Zenilda da Silva Vilacio. ‘I was just sleepwalking.’

We’re sitting in Zenilda’s tumbledown house chatting about the indigenous rights movement in Brazil and her own personal history. At first there’s an edge of weariness in her words. But that gradually fades as she warms to the subject. She paints a vivid picture of the hardships she has endured, both as an Indian and a woman. Yet her round, unlined face shows few traces of the strain.

At the age of six she was sent to work as a maid in Manaus, the sprawling frontier city in the heart of the Amazon. Zenilda’s parents hoped that she would get a better education there, but her work left little spare time or money for schooling.

It was the first time that she had been away from her village of Ponta Alegre. She didn’t even know she was an Indian. Although both her parents spoke the Sateré-Mawé language, it was not passed on to Zenilda or her siblings. ‘In those days being an Indian was something that you kept quiet,’ she says bitterly. ‘It was synonymous with being a savage. You were stupid, lazy and good for nothing. But though we were obliged to remain silent we never lost our identity.’

More than 30 years later, prejudice against native people has not disappeared in Brazil. But Indians are more conscious of their heritage and more vocal in their demands for respect and justice.

After she had been in Manaus a few years her father died and Zenilda returned to her family’s village. Slowly her eyes opened and she started to understand how her people were being mistreated.

'I saw how tough my mother's life was and I saw people going hungry. Indian land and Indian labour were being exploited and in return my people got poorer and more hungry. My father was a woodcutter. He cut down wood every day but every night he slept on the ground. When he died he didn't even have a coffin. The white man he cut wood for was rich, but he didn't help our family. My sisters and I were poor and illiterate while the sons of the "boss" were rich and educated.'

Lured by the prospect of better work, her whole family decided to move to Manaus. A few years later, at age 15, Zenilda was forced to marry a non-Indian since he appeared to be 'a good provider'.

Though they had three children together the relationship soon soured. Her husband began to mock and denigrate her Indian roots.

'He started to talk about how Indians were only good for working in the jungle, that they were no good in the city. I didn't yet know what it meant to be an Indian, that Indians had any value.'

When Zenilda got involved in the indigenous movement in the 1980s, the marriage broke down completely. 'That's when I learned that Indians had rights and that there was a law to protect me.'

It was a revelation. And it was empowering. 'I threw my husband out and kept my children.' Later on all three children would proudly assume their Indian identity.

**'It has been a real fight,' she says. Then she pauses for a moment and smiles quickly before correcting herself. 'It is a real fight.'**

Zenilda joined the AMARN (Association of Indigenous Women from the Upper Rio Negro) and worked with them for a year. 'It was difficult for me because I didn't speak their language. Then one day my colleagues in the movement said that I should leave AMARN and organize women in my own tribe, the Sateré-Mawé.' (In 1991, Brazil's National Indian Foundation estimated that there were 5,825 Sateré-Mawé living on their traditional lands between the Madeira and Tapajós rivers east of Manaus.)

In spite of her inexperience Zenilda was enthusiastic. In 1993 the first meeting of the Association of Indigenous Women of Sateré-Mawé (AMISM) was held in Zenilda's house. The following year two assemblies were organized during which AMISM's statute was approved and candidates elected to administrative positions; in 1995 it was officially registered as a non-profit organization.

AMISM's aims are to fight for the rights of the Sateré-Mawé, especially the women, to improve their health and education and to promote economic self-sufficiency. But the course of the organization's development has not been smooth.

Cash has always been in short supply and at a personal level Zenilda has had to confront the sexist attitudes of some of her male colleagues, both Indian and non-Indian.

'They think that women talk rubbish,' she snorts. 'They claim we're only good in the kitchen and in bed. My first time in Brasilia (the country's capital) the men didn't even shake my hand or say "Good-day"'. One day an Indian man said to my face: "Indigenous women are incompetent, you shouldn't exist in the movement." We women are under a lot of pressure. We need courage, real courage, and strength.'

Zenilda's courage is beginning to pay off both in recognition and respect. During the Sixth General Assembly of COIAB (Co-ordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon) in May 1998, she and her fellow female delegates insisted indigenous women's concerns be discussed. They called for a special section to be created to develop women's projects.

Now she is also eager to build a pan-Amazon women's organization.

'We have met with AMARN to establish a political movement of indigenous women. We desperately need to defend our rights at the national level, too.'

It will be a challenge and Zenilda is determined to take it on. She is clearly a force to be reckoned with.

'It has been a real fight,' she says. Then she pauses for a moment and smiles quickly before correcting herself. 'It is a real fight.'

*Janet Smith is a student of Latin American studies at the University of Essex in England. She spent three years working as a nurse and midwife in the Amazon.*