

FOREWORD BY JESSE JACKSON

Benedita

An Afro-Brazilian
Woman's Story of
Politics and Love
da Silva



AS TOLD TO MEDEA BENJAMIN
AND MAISA MENDONÇA

USE

Chapter Five
Feminism With Passion



"What an amazing experience to be at the Women's Conference in China with tens of thousands of women from all over the world!"

I love when Gal Costa sings that song "Teco, Teco" by Pereira da Costa and Milton Villela:

*Não fazia roupa de boneca nem
tão pouco comidinha com as garotas do
meu bairro, que era o natural.
Subia em poste, soltava papagaio, até
meus quatorze anos era esse o meu mal.*

I didn't make clothes for my doll or
play house with the girls in my
neighborhood, like I was supposed
to. I'd climb lampposts, fly kites.
Until I was 14, this is what was
wrong with me.

Back in sixteenth-century Brazil, the Jesuit priest Antônio Vieira preached that a woman should only leave her home three times in her life—when she was baptized, married, and buried.

Since then, Brazilian women have certainly gotten out of the house. We've struggled for the right to education, and today 60 percent of university graduates are women. We've struggled for the right to work, and today almost half of the workforce are women. We've struggled for the right to vote, and today we are even running for office and winning elections.

Women in Brazil have come a long way, but not far enough. We're still relegated to less prestigious professions—teachers, secretaries, clerical and domestic workers—and we earn half the pay that men do. We may be winning elections, but only six percent of the congressional representatives are women.

While few men today dare to openly defend the idea that women are inferior, sexism still permeates our society. In the media, women are portrayed as sexual objects and their bodies are used to sell all kinds of products. Sometimes sexist attitudes appear in more subtle ways—disguised in our schoolbooks or in the words of popular songs. The message is that girls should be well behaved, cute, and sweet, and boys should be smart, sharp, and competitive.

Gender roles are not natural or determined by biological differences. They're socially constructed roles, and vary according to the culture and the time period. Intuitively, I have always questioned

to live with because he was used to taking care of a household. When Pitanga and his wife separated, his two children Rocco and Camila stayed with him and he raised them on his own. Every man should have the experience of bringing up children, particularly daughters. It's the best cure for breaking down gender stereotypes.

Pitanga is very good to me and my children. When I'm angry, he let's me yell and scream and just listens. Then he says, "Don't get so worked up, Bené. Let's talk about this calmly." Sometimes he complains about me being too independent. When I leave the house early in the morning while he's still asleep, he says, "Why didn't you wake me up? You took a cab? That's ridiculous, I could have driven you. You know I like to spend time with you."

Sure, I'm independent, but I do like to do special things for Pitanga when I get the time. Pitanga likes it when I cook and serve him his food. He jokes around with me and says, "You fought so hard to be liberated and then you end up serving me." But I don't feel oppressed when I cook for him. I enjoy it and wish I had time to do it more often. Sometimes Pitanga drives me around to my appointments—not because he has to but because he wants to. Doing things for each other is simply part of building and maintaining a good relationship.

Many times women in positions of power feel they have to act like men to gain respect. We have an expression to describe someone who is assertive. We say they "*põe o pau na mesa*," which literally means they "put their dick on the table." I consider myself a feminist, but I don't want to have to act like a man to gain respect. I believe I can be assertive and a true feminist without losing my femininity.

I also don't think that feminist women have to be stiff and hide their emotions. Strong women are women who know how to laugh and cry, women who love with passion, women who nurture. I'm an extremely warm and caring lover. I have a very strong personality but in the privacy of my own home, I express all my feelings, including those considered by some to be a sign of weakness.

I know how to flirt and use my charm. I like to dress well and I know that men admire well-dressed women. I admire men who look sharp, too. Sometimes when I see an attractive man, I think of the romantic song *Girl from Ipanema* that goes, *Olha que coisa mais linda, mais cheia de graça*—Look at that beautiful thing, how full of charm. . . . I certainly appreciate a handsome man, a muscular body. But that doesn't mean that I would ever use a man as a sexual object, like men do to women. The most important thing in a relationship is to feel an intellectual affinity. When that happens, that first impression based solely on physical attraction becomes secondary.

And just because I look at other men doesn't mean I'm unfaithful to Pitanga. I'm faithful to him because I respect and trust him. For me, fidelity has to be a mutual agreement. I can't stand this double standard where people think it's acceptable for men to cheat on their partners, but if women do it's a big scandal. If it's adultery when a woman sleeps with another man, then it's adultery when a man sleeps with another woman.

In Brazil, the concept of "conjugal fidelity" is actually written into the Civil Code. It's supposed to work both ways, but in reality it only applies to women and so it becomes an instrument to preserve male domination. That's why I'm trying to change the wording of the Civil Code, eliminating any reference to "conjugal fidelity" and replacing it with "mutual respect and consideration." The latter is a more advanced concept and reflects women's struggle for juridical equality. It also reflects my own feelings that the most important element for a good partnership is not fidelity but mutual respect.

You wouldn't believe the controversy that my suggested revision provoked. Some men in Congress were scandalized and said, "If you're going to get rid of fidelity, you might just as well get rid of marriage." They accused me of advocating free love and attacking marriage as an institution. But I really believe that fidelity in marriage should come from reciprocal love, not from the imposition of punitive laws or obsolete rules that are only applied to women.

I have a very liberated attitude when it comes to sex. I always talked to my children about everything. When they wanted to know how babies were born, my husband didn't know what to tell them, so I explained everything. I gave them all kinds of information about sex. One time my son came home with gonorrhea and my husband was horrified. I was the one who had to take care of him, and I had no problem with that. I also don't have a hang up about my body or nudity. Even today, I take off my clothes in front of my children.

I never put pressure on my daughter to be a virgin when she married, even though that kind of pressure was very common when I was growing up. Most parents were really uptight. They were constantly fretting over whether their daughters "*pularam a cerca*"—jumped the fence. If the girls got caught with their boyfriends, the parents would create a big scandal and sometimes even throw their daughters out of the house. My parents had this type of mentality and my sisters suffered because of it. One of my sisters became a prostitute and had to leave the house. I felt sorry for her and we continued to have a good relationship.

Although I've always tried to pass these liberal values on to my children, my daughter Nilcea is more conservative than I am. My granddaughter Ana Benedita, however, takes after me. Nilcea says, "This child is going to give us a headache." And I say, "Of course she is, *ela vai botar pra quebrar*—she's going to drive us crazy." She's already very assertive and I'm sure she's going to be a very independent woman. But I want her to go out in the world with her eyes open to the difficulties that women face.

One of the real difficulties that many women confront is sexual harassment. Sure, it's nice to feel desired by a man. A sexual advance, if it's done respectfully, makes you feel good and is simply part of the game between the sexes. I'm not offended if a man admires me sexually, but I won't accept an aggressive come-on. I know how to throw a bucket of cold water on a guy's advances

when I have to, but not all women are able to protect themselves. Many times women have to perform sexual favors in order to get a job. And to get ahead professionally, they have to put up with come-ons and lewd behavior from their bosses.

Sexual harassment not only exists in the workplace, but any place where men and women get together. When men first look at women, they're usually undressing them with their eyes. Men feel powerful through sex, especially if they have sex with a lot of different women.

Many men want to have their "*mulher de casa*"—woman at home—and "*mulher da rua*"—woman on the street. The prostitute is seen as someone with whom they can be more sexually intimate and get greater sexual pleasure. Their wives are expected to be more modest. Taboos and dogmas don't allow the wives to fully explore their sexuality. This pushes the men to play out their sexual fantasies with prostitutes, whom they feel they can exploit in whatever ways they please.

Black women bear the brunt of this exploitation, particularly when it comes to white men. There is this impression that black women are "*mais quentes*"—hotter, so men feel free to exploit them more. Black women are considered more pleasing sexually, but these men usually don't want to make a commitment to them. Black women are considered good enough for screwing, but not good enough to marry.

These sexist attitudes lead to one of the most serious problems in Brazil today, which is violence against women. When I was a federal deputy, I helped organize a special Congressional commission to investigate this issue and we were shocked by our findings. We discovered that over 300 cases of violence against women were reported every day. In fact, we discovered that Brazil was the world champion in terms of violence against women!

A large part of the violent crimes against women are committed by their husbands and lovers. Seventy percent of the violence

against Brazilian women takes place in the home. We found case after case of girls impregnated by their own fathers and stepfathers, and women who are beaten by their husbands every day.

I myself had horrible fights with my first husband, Mansinho. If he was drunk and we had an argument, he'd lose control and hit me. I'd defend myself and hit him back. It was terrible. One time we had such a bad fight that I fainted. My father, who lived with us, panicked because he thought I was dead. He tried to kill Mansinho. My children started crying and screamed, "Help my mother. Don't kill my father."

You might wonder why I just didn't leave him. I had been brought up to believe that marriage was for life. And I did like him and he was a good father to our children. These awful fights started after he'd lost his job and was going through a crisis. One time he hit Leleco and bruised him badly. When I came home I found Leleco rolled up in a ball in the corner, crying. I realized just how sick Mansinho was, because I knew he really adored his son. Another time he hit Nilcea. She ran out of the house in the middle of the night with one shoe on and one shoe off, and came to the hospital where I was working. I told my supervisor what happened and asked if I could leave. She was reluctant but she let me go home. When I got home, I had a long conversation with Mansinho. I told him he couldn't hit his daughter like that. He felt badly and came to the bus stop with me so I wouldn't be alone so late at night. I think I never left him because I felt sorry for him—he was really a sick man.

This problem of domestic violence became a priority for the women's movement in Brazil. To deal with this issue, women successfully fought for the establishment of women's police stations, *delegacias da mulher*, run by and for women. There are now 182 of these stations, located in several states. They take care of the physical and psychological needs of women who have been raped. Regular police stations don't offer this kind of help—abused

women usually feel intimidated and humiliated when they go to a regular police station after they've been raped, or after other forms of domestic violence.

The number of reported cases of sexual abuse has risen greatly since these women's police stations were started. Women who had remained silent for years decided to denounce their aggressors, even if it meant running the risk of further marital conflict. Due to the success of these police stations, I made a proposal to expand them throughout the country. But unfortunately, it's up to the individual states to allocate the money, and many state governors are not committed to this project.

While these police stations are helpful in that they provide women with a place where they can file complaints against their abusers, they don't prevent women from being abused. Men may be intimidated by the fact that they have to testify in court, but the court system works in their favor. Just look at the record for men who kill their wives—80 percent of them are found not guilty because they committed the crime "in defense of their honor."

At the same time I was investigating violence against women, I was also participating in a Congressional committee on another violation of women's rights: mass sterilization. We were astonished to discover how many Brazilian women were being sterilized. We found that unlike other countries, where a range of birth control methods are used and sterilization is rather uncommon, in Brazil sterilization is the number one method of birth control. Of the 70 percent of women between 15 and 45 who used some kind of birth control, 44 percent were sterilized. In the developed countries, the average is 5 percent.

The rate was highest among poor, black, and indigenous women. In some states, like the impoverished northeast province of Maranhão, the rate was an astounding 80 percent! The high incidence of sterilization among black women has been denounced by the black movement as a racist policy.

Sometimes girls as young as 13 are sterilized. I was sterilized when I was 22 because I felt at the time that I had no other choice. I regretted it later when I wanted to have another child. If it wasn't for being poor, I would have had more children, since for me, children are a blessing. In my case, I knew that I was being sterilized. But many women don't even know what's happening to them or don't quite understand that it's irreversible.

The mass sterilization of Brazilian women is something new. Before the 1970s, only 5 percent of Brazilian women were sterilized. After that, foreign governments and organizations invested large sums of money to control Brazil's population growth. The World Bank alone gave Brazil over 600 million dollars to set up family planning institutions in seven of the poorest states in the country. Instead of providing women with different family planning options, the main method of birth control promoted by these institutions was sterilization.

Some people say that I'm paranoid when I say that the First World is imposing these population programs on the Third World. But I really believe that the rich countries are determined to reduce the population of the poor countries, even if these countries aren't overpopulated. Look at the case of Brazil. It's larger than the continental United States, but our population of 160 million is much smaller than the 250 million in the United States.

First we were told that we had to reduce our population to pull ourselves out of poverty. But sterilization doesn't guarantee that a woman will find a job, a school for her kids, or a decent house to live in.

Next we were told that we had to reduce our population because we were destroying the environment by depleting the earth's resources. But the world's environmental crisis has more to do with the consumerism of the developed countries than too many people in poor countries. The richest 20 percent of the world's population produces about 75 percent of the world's pol-

lution. Here in Brazil, it's not the poor who are destroying the environment. It's the big timber and mining companies, and the large cattle ranchers.

I'm not saying that we don't want to plan our families. We do. In the cities, many poor women prefer to have small families, and they need information on the best methods available. In the countryside, it's different. People often want to have lots of children because children start working by the time they're seven and contribute to the family income. These people should not be forced to have fewer children because some foreign agency wants them to. There's a big difference between family planning and population control.

We need to provide women with different birth control options, and we also need to educate men. Women should not have the sole responsibility for family planning, and we have to encourage men to consider options like vasectomies, which are less risky than sterilization for women.

A high rate of population growth has to be seen as a symptom of a larger problem, which is poverty. It's been proven the world over that population growth goes down as people—especially women—become better educated and their standard of living goes up. While the rich countries want to get rid of the poor, we in the poor countries want to get rid of poverty.

These issues of mass sterilization, violence against women, and gender inequalities became the focus of my work during my first term in Congress. The years I worked intensively on these problems, from 1986 to 1988, were the best moments of my life. We were just coming out of the dictatorship and we were in the process of writing a new constitution. Women's groups around the country were mobilizing, and we worked like mad to make sure that our rights were included in the new constitution.

Since Brazil's independence in September 7, 1822, we've had seven constitutions and none of them included women's rights. In fact, there were parts of the old constitutions that were patently

sexist. Women who weren't faithful to their husbands didn't have the right of inheritance. Women didn't have the right to bring charges against their husbands, even if their husbands beat them.

Today, Brazil's Constitution is among the most progressive in the world in terms of women's rights. It declares discrimination against women illegal, and says women must receive equal pay for equal work. It guarantees 120 days of maternity leave for women and eight days of paternity leave for men. It says the state has the responsibility to guarantee that people receive information and access to non-coercive family planning.

We worked hard to get language in the Constitution that guarantees the rights of domestic workers—an issue that is very dear to me. The Constitution spells out that domestic workers should have the same rights as other workers—including the right to earn the legally specified minimum wage, and the right to paid vacations and paid holidays.

I also fought to guarantee the rights of women prisoners. Women in prison now have the right to keep their children with them during the months the children are breast-feeding. And we won the right for women prisoners to have conjugal visits, which were previously only granted to men.

But it's one thing to have good laws on the books, and another to implement them. Right now, many of the rights guaranteed in the Constitution are constantly violated. Brazilian society must internalize these rights and demand that they be upheld.

Look at the continued discrimination against women in the work force. Although it's illegal, women are still fired for getting pregnant. Many companies ask for a pregnancy test before hiring a woman, and won't hire her if the test is positive. It's still hard for women to get promoted to managerial positions, and when they do, they get paid less than men.

Brazil's three million domestic workers are still terribly exploited. They receive miserable wages and are forced to work long hours.

When they work as live-in maids, they often live in truly slave-like conditions. If they are young girls who want to study, it's usually impossible for them to combine their work with school. Employers continue to treat maids as second-class human beings.

And we shouldn't forget that on top of discrimination at work, women go home to face the double shift of household chores and taking care of the children. The poorest and most overworked women are those in single-parent households: in Brazil, one in five households is headed by a woman.

At the political level, there is still very little space for women in Congress. When we organize investigations into "women's issues" such as violence against women or mass sterilization, they are given short shrift. The major decision-making power remains concentrated in the hands of a small group of men. As I've said time and time again, power is still male, white, and rich.

That accounts for the fact that every time we take two steps forward, we're forced to take one step back. Right now we're faced with the risk of another backlash from the new conservative wave that is permeating Brazilian society. They're talking about restricting the small gains we've made, such as the right to abortion in the case of rape, which is presently the only situation in which abortion is permitted.

Whether in the home, the workplace or the halls of Congress, women still have little power. We worked so hard to get a Constitution that's strong on women's rights, but for the majority of poor women, the constitutional rights we won are pretty meaningless. Poor women are still faced with the daily dilemma of how to survive and feed their children. The girls born and raised in the *favelas* still face few career options apart from crime or prostitution.

In the beginning, the women's movement, which started out as a middle class movement, had a hard time relating to poor women. They didn't understand that the issues most important to poor women in the *favelas* were how to get running water, how to get

our husbands out of the bars, how to get a job. Issues about our bodies and sexuality weren't priorities, like they were for wealthier women. The right to abortion—which has always been a key issue for middle class women—was secondary for us. It's true that poor women were dying from botched abortions, but our day-to-day poverty was so grinding that coping with our daily needs came first.

The gap between poor and middle class women became really clear to me in 1968. That year, my house was destroyed by a storm and we were left homeless. Desperate, I asked for help from some of the women in the feminist movement who worked with us in the *favelas*. I was shocked when they said they couldn't help me. They were interested in talking to us about women's rights, but their idea of sisterhood didn't include helping a sister in need. It made me realize that we women in the *favelas* needed our own space to discuss *our* problems, like how to get a roof over our heads and shoes for our children. We started to get together to talk and help each other in everything from taking care of our children to doing each other's nails and hair. We concentrated on our day-to-day problems, but eventually we started to talk about everything from social issues to our bodies and our sexuality.

Today, the women's movement is much broader and there is greater understanding and solidarity across classes. Now there are women's groups all over Brazil focusing on all kinds of issues—women's health, reproductive rights, domestic violence, affirmative action. These issues not only cross class lines, but international boundaries. They are problems that affect women in every part of the world. That's why we need to work together on an international level to find creative ways to guarantee women's rights. This became clear to me when I had the great opportunity to attend the Fourth International Women's Conference in China in 1995.

It was an amazing experience to be with tens of thousands of women from all over the world! It's shameful how little media coverage there was of the conference in Brazil, given the historic

nature of the meeting and the fact that Brazil sent the largest governmental and non-governmental delegation of any country.

There were plenty of controversial issues at the conference, especially issues related to sexual and reproductive rights. Sometimes we stayed up until 2 or 3 in the morning debating. In these discussions, there were two camps—those who wanted to expand women's rights, and those who wanted to respect traditional customs and preserve the status quo.

The Brazilian delegation fit squarely in the first camp—it was extremely progressive in its positions and had a great impact on the debates. We tended to have the same positions as women from Europe, the United States, and Canada. The more conservative women were Muslim women from countries like Iraq, Morocco, and Sudan, as well as Catholic delegates from the Vatican and its allies like Argentina and Guatemala. They often looked at issues from a purely religious context, instead of a world context in which there are a lot of different ethnic groups, cultures, religions, and even people with no religious beliefs at all.

The progressive delegations wanted to have women's rights considered universal, fundamental human rights that should be guaranteed by governments everywhere. The conservatives wanted to qualify those rights, taking into account cultural and religious differences. The Muslims, for example, don't believe that women should have the right to inheritance because it goes against their religion. The liberals wanted to press governments to guarantee that adolescents have access to sex education. The conservatives wanted to leave it up to the parents to decide how and when their children should receive this information.

Another source of tension was between women from rich and poor countries. Delegates from rich countries wanted to focus on sexual rights instead of the most pressing issue confronting women, which is poverty. We pointed out that it was insensitive for the rich countries to focus on sexual freedom when so many women still

live in misery and have no economic independence.

For all the women at the conference, one thing was clear: in spite of the gains made throughout the world, no country treats women the same way men are treated. In no society do women enjoy the same opportunities as men. Seventy percent of poor people in the world are women, and over two-thirds of the world's illiterate are women. Women still earn less than men, and they continue to be the last hired and the first fired. The world over, women still have less access to political and economic decision-making.

Even the nations that define themselves as advanced democracies have not eliminated sex discrimination. Looking at the world from a woman's perspective, no country in the world is democratic.

That's why whoever we are, wherever we live, we women can't let down our guard. We must keep on fighting to gain new ground. And at the same time we organize women, we can't forget our responsibility to educate men. Because the fight for women's rights is not a war between the sexes, but a struggle to create a true partnership with men. I'm convinced that the more rights we gain as women, the freer men will be. Equality between the sexes is the key to a better world for all of us.

I feel full of hope when I look at my granddaughter and remember the day she was born. On March 8, 1985, International Women's Day, I was speaking at a women's rally. Somehow, as I spoke, I had a premonition that my daughter Nilceia was going to give birth to a baby girl. I told the crowd: "Another Benedita is coming into the world. I know that she and many others will keep our struggle alive!" After that, Nilceia didn't have a choice but to name her daughter after me. Her name is Ana Benedita. She, as well as my other grandchildren, is a great inspiration in my life.

Chapter Six Exploding the Myth of Racial Harmony



Photo by Rick Reinhard

*Benedita, on a visit to the United States, met with
Reverend Jesse Jackson*