

Brazil: Sônia Guajajara, indigenous women leading in the fight for justice

Monday 22 June 2020, by [Brasil de Fato](#), [GUAJAJARA Sônia](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2020).

As of June 16, Brazil is reporting 888,271 confirmed coronavirus infections and 43,959 Covid-19 deaths, second only to the United States and assumed to significantly undercount the real totals. Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has stoked the pandemic by ridiculing social distancing, insisting on keeping Brazilian business open, and calling his supporters to take to the streets without masks. Bolsonaro regularly spouts racist, sexist, homophobic, and misogynist rhetoric. And he has taken special aim at indigenous peoples by opening up millions of acres of the Amazon rain forest to private logging and ranching, leading to a string of murders of indigenous leaders. Meanwhile, the pandemic itself is killing indigenous people at alarmingly high rates [1], threatening geographically isolated indigenous tribes with genocide.

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This interview [2] with Sônia Guajajara, one of Brazil's leading indigenous voices, was conducted by Fabiana Reinholz and Katia Marko of the Rio Grande do Sul branch of Brasil de Fato, one of Brazil's leading independent media outlets launched in conjunction with the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2003.

Part 1 reviews Guajajara's activist history, Brazil's failure to teach indigenous history in public schools, and her experience running for vice president in 2018. Part 2 will take up the movement against Bolsonaro.

PART 1

Sônia Guajajara (né Sônia Bone) was born in the Indigenous Territory of Araribóia in the state of Maranhão. From a very early age she understood she would have to struggle against anonymity, against the invisibility of Brazil's indigenous people. "I always wanted to find a path, a way to bring the history and way of life of the indigenous people to light for society as a whole."

Sônia is an elementary school teacher and a nursing assistant, and an indigenous feminist leader. Her strength and courage have carried her very far, becoming the first indigenous woman to run for the executive of the Republic, in 2018, at the age of 44 as the vice-presidential candidate for the Party for Socialism and Freedom [3].

At the age of 15, Sônia left home to study in the state of Minas Gerais following an invitation from the National Indian Foundation (Funai) and today holds a master's degree in Culture and Society from the Institute of Humanities, Arts, and Culture from the Federal University of Bahia. In 2001, she participated in the first national indigenous gathering, a conference held after a national Indigenous March, to discuss the Statutes of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil in Luziânia in the state of Goiás.

She also made history by delivering the Moto Serra de Ouro Award to Senator Kátia Abreu in defense of the Forest Law. In 2012, she coordinated the Terra Livre Camp at the People's Summit [4], which was organized in opposition to the Rio +20 United Nations conference on sustainable development. And the following year, she led the organization of the Indigenous Peoples Week and the occupation of the plenary of the Chamber of Deputies and the Planalto Palace, Brazil's presidential palace.

During almost two decades in the struggle for the rights of the original peoples, she has held leading positions in a variety of organizations and movements. Among them, the Coalition of Organizations and Confederations of Indigenous Peoples of Maranhão (Coapima), the Coalition of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (Coiab), and the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (Apib), where she is executive coordinator.

Brasil de Fato: What does it mean to be an indigenous woman in Brazil?

Sônia Guajajara: Being an indigenous woman in Brazil means living as an eternal challenge, to struggle, to occupy space, to be a protagonist for your own history. Historically, we were told that we could not occupy certain spaces. For a long time, indigenous women were invisible, our work was confined to our villages, which was always very important work because we play a guiding role there. But the time came when we realized we can do a lot more than this, that we can also take our place in the front lines of all struggles.

It is a real challenge for us to break through this barrier, to leave the villages to take up these spaces. Imagine occupying these spaces out here, where there is prejudice, an ingrained racism that has never been overcome, even though at some point we thought we were making progress... And we are now faced with this new fight against racism, against a prejudice that is increasingly expressed in society as a whole.

So being an indigenous woman is a permanent fight to reaffirm your culture, your identity, and, particularly, your gender.

BdF: When did you begin your activism?

SG: I was born an activist. I've spent my whole life fighting against anonymity, against indigenous peoples' invisibility. I always wanted to find a path, a way to bring the history and way of life of the indigenous people to light for society as a whole. I always understood that the history told about indigenous people was not real history. And this is still true today in our elementary school books where indigenous peoples are treated as the peoples of 1500, as peoples from the past.

This always bothered me a lot because the books didn't deal with, and they still don't, indigenous people today, in the present. They don't address violence against the indigenous peoples, including the fight for land, even though the Brazilian Constitution guarantees territorial rights for indigenous peoples. Clearly, this right is an original right, it predates the Constitution, but the Constitution does recognize it, it's written that this State shall not demarcate indigenous territories.

There is a distancing between indigenous peoples' reality, which is a constant struggle, constant

resistance, and what society knows about us, or what the educational system teaches. This generates an alienation, and with it, the continuing ignorance of our own history. Because whoever doesn't know the history of Brazil doesn't know the history of the indigenous peoples, and doesn't know themselves.

BdF: This is also something that happens when we talk about black people, their history is not discussed. Why don't we bring this history into our schools? Why haven't we succeeded in changing this?

SG: The very foundation of the country's development plan, the foundation of the country's economic plan is based on the extermination of indigenous peoples and the black population because we have always been seen as obstacles, as problems. President Jair Bolsonaro himself, when he was a federal deputy, put it very clearly when he said, "the cavalry of the United States was so competent that they managed to exterminate all the Indians, and today they do not have this problem."

This is a totally criminal view, but it comes from the criminal processes of killing everyone who hindered development. So there's always been this idea that progress comes from death. All the wealthy white elite, who have always been in charge of the country, will never permit a discussion about diversity in Brazil, to discuss the presence of diverse peoples, cultures, and territories.

So, for as long as we have conducted this struggle, this resistance, in the indigenous movement, in the black movement, we remain invisible. Our lives continue to be totally secondary, our rights are attacked or restricted and very little is achieved. All of this adds up to the elite who are in power, in charge, being able to continue saying what happens and what does not. Historically, we have been told where we belong, our limits. And we have carried out this fight because we are stubborn, resilient, and we will not accept this oppressive system, this permanent domination, we will not accept this imposition.

And as long as our people continue dying, they are dying in the struggle. That's why I say that I was always in the fight, on the front line. Ever since I was learning my ABCs, I carried this unease with me that I couldn't just watch, couldn't see all this without reacting. Some time passed and I assumed a leadership post in the indigenous movement in the state of Maranhão for two terms, then I took on a role in the indigenous movement in the Confederation of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon, then the Confederation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil. It is a story of many struggles and challenges, but also a lot of courage because, despite everything we were told we could not do, we were breaking down barriers and kept occupying these spaces.

I came up from a local territory, I passed through the state, through the Amazon, through the national movement, and then I took on another place in the electoral arena, which went beyond the limits of the indigenous struggle. We joined this fight for the first time in history, it took 518 years for this to happen, and it was very significant for us.

BdF: This was the first election after the 2016 coup that threw Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff out of office in what was, obviously, a misogynist coup. And today research shows growing prejudiced attacks against women, both in the mainstream press and through Bolsonaro's "hate office" on social media. Given all this, how do you evaluate women's participation in politics in Brazil and why is it still so low?

SG: Exactly, there is still a very small number of women participating in politics, especially considering that women have assumed leading roles in many struggles. However, I think we have managed to take a leap in recent years. Although there is still a lot to be done for women to be recognized as having equal capabilities.

Even today, it is unfortunate that we see how many people won't vote for a woman or trust a candidate just because she is a woman, because they still think politics is a place for men. It's the machismo that is still totally out there that is very present, and it's this machismo that grows louder when it comes to choosing, to electing representatives. It's a sad reality, but that's still the way it is. I think that we need to fight really strongly against this machismo if we want to take on more and more of these roles.

In addition to machismo, the electoral arena ends up being very unfair, very unfair in the campaign itself because people often vote to please others and votes are bought and sold. I think that we women, when we enter politics, people who come from social movements, from the frontlines of resistance, people who come mainly from the left, we come to make a difference. We come to change this way of doing politics. And every woman who enters this field, should keep in mind that our job is to change this way of doing politics. But people are very used to, accustomed to being able to vote in exchange for something, and if we don't stoop to this, it reduces the votes needed to elect women by even more.

BdF: Are women encouraged within the parties?

SG: There is some encouragement, but I think it is still very tentative. The parties still prioritize those who have more experience, or who have more, perhaps, friendships. And, generally, those who have more experience are men because they have always been, throughout our whole history, occupying these places, while there are still very few of us women with this experience in political life. So when it comes to choosing who the parties prioritize, it is usually still the men. Only a few parties make a priority of women joining this field.

Given that, we have already seen several surveys after the elections demonstrating that many women were put on electoral lists only to fulfill, or to complement gender quotas. We have to raise this discussion more insistently so that women do not accept launching their candidacies just to supplement the quotas, but so that, in fact, women's campaigns are priorities, they have equal incentives, and are able campaign just like any candidate.

My candidacy with Guilherme Boulos was very fair, very collaborate, not least because our attitude was that each candidate was equal, neither one being more or less important. Obviously, the political system itself forces you declare a candidate to lead the ticket, with a vice-president and such. But we adopted a co-candidacy campaign. This was understood internally, within the party. We ran a totally shared campaign with a shared agenda. I had full autonomy to create my own agenda, with resources dedicated to women. It was a very different experience, both because of the co-candidacy and because of the way our resources were used to facilitate autonomous agendas.

PART 11

Brasil de Fato: The extreme right is imposing its fascist, conservative agenda. How is this reflected in indigenous communities?

Sônia Guajajara: It is a very big concern. This conservatism is growing and growing everywhere. And we are not exempt from this whole process. Today, there are a very large number of indigenous people who come to the cities, who travels to the cities, who have access to communication, and who have more access to the internet. Of course, all of this ends up influencing a lot of people's opinions where ever they may be.

We have two extreme situations at the moment, but I think they are on a parallel, because at the

same time that conservatism is growing (even reaching the villages), we, indigenous women, are breaking many barriers and leaving these village spaces, and even occupying many external spaces. A great example of this was last year when we held the first March of Indigenous Women, which took place in the capital city, Brasilia. It was the first march of indigenous women in the world and its serving as an example to inspire other women from other continents, who also want to organize their own marches.

We marched to show that we are united, that we want to fight together, and that we refuse to endure Bolsonaro's genocidal policies in silence. The march was a reaction to all these attacks and this creeping fascism.

The march was only possible because many other women have already overcome these barriers and are taking over positions of leadership. We have, in the Brazilian Amazon, Nara Baré, who was the first woman to assume the general coordination of the Coalition of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (Coiab). That was a long struggle, 10 years. Coiab is 31 years old and it was only in 2017 that we managed to get a woman onto the general executive committee.

Here in Maranhão, in the last elections for the indigenous organization of our state, the Coalition of Organizations and Confederations of Indigenous Peoples of Maranhão (Coapimba), we elected three women and one man to the four-person coordinating committee. And that man was the secretary, precisely the role usually reserved for women if assumed any post in the leadership.

And in the last election held in February, we chose two men and two women, including a woman as general coordinator and vice-coordinator the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (Apib).

The fact that these women are taking on various leadership roles (in conjunction with other women who play important roles in education, health, culture, and in the community itself) made it possible for us to carry out the march. And this motivated many women to come closer together, to strengthen our unity. All four or five thousand women who participated in the march all came back with this feeling that they would no longer be the same, and that we need to take no leadership.

So, on the one hand, conservatism is growing, but for us indigenous women, our time has come, and we are on the front lines.

BdF: We are also experiencing a setback with respect to rights won by indigenous people alongside major advances in mining in indigenous territories. How does Apib see this whole situation?

SG: It is really a very traumatic moment that we are living in, perhaps one of the worst moments in our entire history. Because in the middle of this health crisis, the pandemic that is frightening everyone so much, many people have shied away from the struggle, the fight to stop these unprecedented invasions into indigenous territories. And we have had to pause for a while because of the pandemic, because we must understand how to fight and control this new coronavirus.

But we are beginning to realize that we cannot stop all the other things we have been fighting for, because the invaders are not stopping, the rural parliamentary bloc that supports mining and ranching is not stopping. In fact, they want to take advantage of this moment to strengthen their alliances with all these sectors, including the timber industry, agribusiness, mining, etc. in order to pass laws beneficial to their allies.

At the same time, we must seek out means, measures, and strategies to avoid greater contamination of indigenous peoples by the coronavirus. We must remain constantly vigilant because all these

attacks are underway, we must stop them from adding up to the extermination of indigenous peoples. While we are quarantining and following social distancing in the villages, in the territories, the invaders are working twenty-four hours a day.

We are seeing a huge increase in deforestation. The National Institute for Space Research (Inpe) demonstrated that from mid-March to mid-April there was a 29.9 percent increase in general deforestation (using satellite imaging). Worse, when you analyze the clearing of forests in indigenous lands, you see an increase of a little over 50 percent in deforestation compared to the same period last year. Today, there are 20,000 gold miners in the Yanomami indigenous land, in Roraima.

How do we remove these invaders? Because, of course, there is a lot of concern about the destruction these invaders cause, as well as the risk of contamination, all of which are real vectors of contamination risk for indigenous peoples. We are facing a very serious moment in our history, it requires us to redouble our efforts to prevent a new genocide against our indigenous peoples.

BdF: What is the state of the pandemic in indigenous villages, how are they dealing with it?

SG: Everyone is feeling its presence; a lot of people are already suffering and many lives have been lost. We indigenous people are very distressed about how much it is spreading amongst our people.

I want to give you some updated figures now from a national committee for indigenous life and memory that we created recently. This committee is composed of indigenous leaders from the five regions of the country and volunteer employees who are helping to collect and systematize the data. It is absurd that the Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health (SESAI) is not accounting for all indigenous deaths, and even refuses to do so when presented with the information.

I want to highlight two things, one is the comparison of our data with that of SESAI. We insist that the Brazilian state officially recognize the data presented by the indigenous movement, it is impossible to ignore the situation as if everything were fine, as if so many haven't died among the indigenous.

Here are the figures recorded by our committee. On June 6, we counted 236 deceased indigenous people, 2,390 infected, and 93 people whose health was affected. The SESAI is reporting just 79 deaths and 1,965 infected. The biggest danger and the most serious situation is in the Amazon region, and especially in the state of Amazonas, where the state is in collapse under the impact of the highest number of indigenous people's deaths.

The SESAI initially refused to register indigenous people living in urban areas, those who do not currently live in the villages, but now we see that they are not registering anything, anywhere, because even when the Special Indigenous Sanitary District (DISEI) reports a death, the case is not being reported in the SESAI bulletin. And what we know is that the SESAI secretary is advising DISEIS not to disclose this data, to declare publicly, until it is approved by the SESAI legal officer in Brasília.

It's impossible to overstate how ridiculous this is. The SESAI is also advising DISEIS not to accept any kind of help from non-governmental organizations or the indigenous movement. Coiab organized an initiative here in the Amazon to help the Indigenous Health Assistance Houses (CASAI), sending each of them a small amount for the purchase of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health professionals. However, some of these houses were saying that they could not accept the aid because of DISEI guidance. Now you can imagine what this represents, for us it means only one thing, the institutionalization of indigenous genocide. At this moment, it is totally unacceptable for

them to refuse these partnerships.

The Kokama people in Amazonas are crying out for help. The first case of an infected indigenous person in Amazonas was that of a 20-year-old girl from the Kokama people, on March 25, who was infected by a doctor. The contagion then spread throughout the state.

If the Brazilian state or SESAI, had wanted, they could have set up sanitary barriers there from the beginning and prevented the pandemic's proliferation. Yet, they did not do it then, they are not doing it today, and they do not want to do it in the future.

BdF: How do you see things changing after the pandemic? There are several debates about global developmental models. After all, this pandemic does not come out of nowhere, it is the result of a particular system, the way life is organized, a way of caring for, or neglecting, the planet. The indigenous leader Ailton Krenak says that we need less development and more involvement with human beings, with Mother Earth...

SG: Certainly, we have been saying for a long time. The world did not stop to listen to the warnings that the Earth had been giving for some time, so the Earth brought the world to a halt to make itself heard. So, this is exactly the time to discuss the lessons we can learn from this pandemic. A peoples' solidarity network is growing. Many people who imagined that they were self-sufficient, that they can live in the city and depend only on what they buy at the supermarket, are beginning to understand that there comes a time when, even if you have money, you will not be able to buy what you need. This moment can be an opportunity for many people to understand why it is necessary to change their forms of consumption, that the more wildly you consume, the more you contribute to the degradation of the planet, towards the end of the planet.

People have to rethink their forms of consumption, they have to understand that individualism must come to an end, that we have to adopt collective ways of doing things, of strengthening our mutual networks. Principally, we must take on our responsibilities in the fight to change the model of economic development. It is urgent to break with this economic model, and we indigenous people and environmentalists will not be able to create the pressure for this change to happen on our own. It will take much more involvement, much more engagement. We must communicate more openly to make this more possible. It is necessary for other social movements to take this up as their own cause, so that people really can conceive of a new society, more just, based on sisterhood and brotherhood, based on solidarity. For that, struggles must be more collective, they must raise their political and ecological consciousness, understanding that it is necessary to connect, or reconnect, to Mother Earth. We must understand clearly that Mother Earth guarantees sustenance and life on our planet.

P.S.

- No Borders on June 16, 2020 (part 1):
- No Borders on June 18, 2020 (part 2):
<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/06/18/sonia-guajajara-indigenous-women-in-brazil-leading-in-the-fight-for-justice-part-2/>
- Translated by No Borders News.

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 53402), [Covid-19 \(Brazil\): Coronavirus Is Killing Isolated Indigenous Peoples at a Staggering Rate](#).

[2] <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2020/06/09/povos-indigenas-vivem-momento-traumatico-afirma-sonia-guajajara?fbclid=IwAR0KhGDqCOrwGKy097XaSrdH3XTt7kdPEhXkkoxIUiZjqBqzeCG2UmKbBTg>

[3] ESSF (article 44385), [An Indigenous Reconstruction in Brazil - A woman running for Brazil's presidency](#).

[4] <https://www.oeco.org.br/noticias/26168-declaracao-final-da-cupula-dos-povos/>