

Large projects and (Re)patriarchalization of territories in Latin America: the case of the Belo Monte power plant and its impacts in Altamira and the region

Abstract

This article discusses the impacts of large-scale projects and their implications for the territories and bodies of local populations. The objective was to analyze how these projects with high environmental impact promoted the repatriarchalization of territories, based on their theoretical and practical justifications, their economic bases, and the implementation mechanisms aimed at control and social subordination. The methodological approach was a bibliographic review combined with a case study of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant and the impacts generated by its installation in Altamira (PA) and its surroundings.

Keywords: Latin America, territory, big projects, impacts on women

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Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century in Latin America was marked by the increase in agricultural exports and large extractive projects that deepened the reprimarization of national economies. Added to this scenario was the decline of the hegemony of progressive governments and a political reconfiguration in the region, with the rise of conservative governments. In Brazil, this political change resulted in the dismantling of institutions responsible for monitoring environmental areas, among other rights losses, according to the Cipó Platform Report.

“The lack of capacity by federal agencies to enforce environmental laws is also due to the small budget allocated to inspection agencies in recent years. In 2021, the federal government proposed, through the Annual Budget Law, R\$1.72 billion for all expenses of the Ministry of the Environment -- the lowest budget amount since 2000.”

The intensification of socio-territorial conflicts has revealed systematic violence against the bodies of women, black people, and indigenous people, who are targets of moral harassment and sexual violation. These processes of violence cannot be dissociated from the history of colonization of indigenous and Afro-descendant territories, bodies, and subjectivities in Latin America. As Lugones (2007) analyzes, gender coloniality has imposed a matrix of oppression that articulates racial and sexual hierarchies, naturalizing the dehumanization of racialized women. Thus, these women are doubly subjugated — by gender and ethnic-racial oppression — and positioned as inferior compared to the image of the white Western man, elevated as a paradigm of rationality and superiority.

Sexual violence, especially against indigenous and black descendants, becomes invisible and becomes a structuring practice for the masculinization of territories and the reproduction of patriarchal and neoliberal development models.¹ Svampa² draws attention to the historical relationship between exploitative activities and the masculinization of territories and the reinforcement of patriarchy. In a scenario where there is a concentration of the male population,

activities such as prostitution and trafficking of women are conceived as natural, rather than being inserted into a context of social and economic problems.

Violence against women's bodies takes on broad meanings in the context of socio-territorial conflicts. It is not a mere consequence of a scenario of disputes. Under a patriarchal and colonial logic regarding the bodies and subjectivities of some actors, violations constitute structuring practices of this model. Hernández Castillo³ states that the violation of the territories of indigenous and peasant peoples produces “displacements that leave their lands ‘free’ for capital. In this onslaught of violence and dispossession, women's bodies have also been converted into territories to be invaded and violated.”

As pointed out by the Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo⁴, women's struggles in Latin America led to the adoption of a feminist perspective to understand the dynamics of territories: how and why women resist and establish links between the defense of feminized bodies and the protection of territories. Based on the body-territory relationship, feminists have demonstrated how predatory environmental activities (re)patriarchalize territories, and the bases of resistance that have sustained women's struggles against these processes.

By becoming a space, the body is configured as a map; and, by assuming the function of a map, it carries memories and historical sedimentations. The inscription of messages on the body reveals its condition as a symbolic surface, where hegemonic narratives are fixed and shape the configuration of the bodies, in line with systemic needs. The notion of bodies as maps and spaces of inscription also appears in Segato⁵, who identifies in so-called expressive crimes the extreme materialization of this logic: “fraternity inscribes its discourse on the kidnapped body, marked by collective torture, inseminated by group rape and eliminated at the end of the terrible ordeal”.⁵

From development to the exploitation of natural resources

The concept of development has been defended as a way of overcoming structural backwardness in countries. In the 1960s, the

predominant conception of economic development policies was as a way of overcoming a country's backwardness. In Latin America, several countries carried out the development process based on state-directed industrialization, and the case of development in Brazil from the 1950s to the 1960s was a great example of this model. Esteva⁶ states that in the 1940s, between the post-World War II world in formation and the ongoing decolonization process, the concept of underdevelopment emerged, giving contemporary meaning to the concept of economic development. By classifying peripheral countries as underdeveloped, central countries changed the colonial process of direct occupation to begin interfering in peripheral countries with the aim of interfering in the economic development of these countries, as a way of "colonizing the ongoing decolonization".

The concept of development is a central theme in debates on the situation of Latin American countries.⁷ In reflections on Latin American countries' conditions of existence, economic development appears as a path to the autonomy necessary for Latin American nation-states to organize their economies based on their own needs. These reflections stem from "Latin American modernism," which has limits to this autonomy in its structural conditions of formation.⁸

In Latin America, Prebisch, Celso Furtado, and economists from ECLAC contributed to the development of "structuralist" thinking, which relates countries' economic structures to the development process.⁹ Latin American countries face a dilemma because their exports of primary products depend on their price elasticity, which is much higher than manufactured products. Therefore, their exports are much more volatile in times of crisis than those of countries with a more developed manufacturing sector. This price volatility tends to produce a series of consequences that compromise wealth formation.

Public investments in carrying out large public projects would contribute to development. However, these projects often led to precarious employment relationships, meaning that local populations did not benefit from them and, on the contrary, worsened their living conditions. During the 1990s, the development model based on import substitution processes ended with the deepening of globalization and the indebtedness of Latin American countries. However, the implementation of large projects continued to occur in smaller numbers and a more isolated manner, now with more significant links to the export sectors. Thus, there was a return to the development model based on commodities and natural resources exports.

The implementation of large projects and extractive and environmental activities

Large projects generally interfere with access to available water resources. As a result, women are forced to travel longer distances to obtain drinking water, increasing their workload. In addition, indirect effects such as water, soil, and air contamination directly impact the health of women and their families, with the emergence of respiratory, dermatological, and other diseases.¹⁰

Living and working conditions after large projects with environmental impacts increase women's responsibility for caring for the sick, intensifying both the physical and psychological burdens. The logic of extractive accumulation depends on the appropriation of free, invisible, and undervalued labor carried out by women and on the exploitation of nature.¹¹ Glaeser¹² observes that large projects can cause institutional failure when the displaced people and workers are attracted to small cities in developing countries.

According to Svampa¹³, the advance of the exploitation of natural resources causes a reconfiguration of territorial and sociopolitical

dynamics, a phenomenon that the author calls the "ecoterritorial turn". This turn expresses the emergence of new socio-environmental conflicts, in which affected communities demand the recognition of their territories as spaces of life, identity, and rights, in contrast to the mercantile and devastating logic imposed by extractive projects. Thus, the socio-environmental impacts deepen, revealing processes of environmental degradation, loss of territories, human and cultural rights violations, and the compromise of local populations' health and quality of life.¹⁴

Segato⁵ states that the appropriation of territories also presupposes the violent possession of women's bodies, converting both into sacrificial elements for the consolidation of territorial control. Aráoz¹⁴ argues that neo-extractivism is not just a contemporary economic phenomenon but a constitutive part of the genesis of Western modernity. Mining, the exploitation of natural resources with environmental degradation, and the plundering of Indigenous territories would be, for the author, the historical foundations of capitalism, establishing a structural relationship of systematic destruction of nature and domination of racialized peoples.

According to the Collective Critical Views of the Territory from Feminism¹⁵, the implementation of extractive megaprojects has intensified care work and generated forms of violence, in addition to causing the loss of food sovereignty and deepening the situation of dependency of the affected communities. This process, in the context of extractive projects, intensifies gender power relations, widening the inequalities that affect women and children, altering the cycles that sustain life, and promoting greater control and violence over female bodies with the implementation of extractive activities.

The practices adopted in resource exploration have enabled collective reflections on the impacts of extractive activities on diverse bodies and the social dynamics of communities. The physical, symbolic, and emotional effects observed are linked to community relations and social conflicts generated by the presence of megaprojects.

The concept of (re)patriarchalization of territories is supported as an analytical tool to identify the intertwining of multiple forms of violence associated with the current cycle of capital expansion in the Latin American continent, as well as women's collective responses to the territorialization of megaprojects, the new neocolonial forms of expropriation of living spaces and the reconfiguration of patriarchy required by extractive logic.¹⁵

Extractive activities establish a new patriarchal order that intensifies and re-signifies the sexist relations that already exist in the territories. To understand these dynamics, Cruz Hernández et al.,¹⁶ propose a reading of territories as biophysical and geographic spaces and as environments of social, cultural, and corporal life. Authors have identified five dimensions of the (re)patriarchalization of territories: political, economic, ecological, cultural, and corporal.^{4,16}

Political (re)patriarchalization manifests itself in masculinizing decision-making processes in territories impacted by extractivism.¹⁶ When companies or state agents establish themselves to promote or impose extractive projects, they adopt strategies that weaken the collective bargaining capacity of communities, favoring individual relationships. In many cases, dialogue is directed at men, whether local leaders or male members with more significant power within families, resulting in the exclusion of women from decision-making processes that affect their lives and territories, as discussed by several authors, including Schmutz¹⁷, who analyzed the case of the Belo Monte Dam.

The Mirador mining project in the southern Ecuadorian Amazon can be considered an example of a situation in which women only became aware of the sale of their land after their husbands were persuaded to sign contracts with the company.¹⁸ Economic (re) patriarchalization refers to forming patriarchal labor structures driven by extractive exploitation projects.¹⁶ This occurs when sizable environmental exploitation projects are installed. The local economy is reoriented to meet the demands of corporations, causing the loss of community access to natural resources that support consolidated and supportive economic practices.

The wages offered by companies in underdeveloped regions become a mechanism of dependency, reconfiguring gender relations: men abandon their lands to become wage workers, reinforcing their position as providers, while women become economically subordinate and dependent. Although companies and the State justify the implementation of large projects with the promise of job creation, the reality reveals the creation of temporary, unskilled jobs marked by exploitative conditions, as evidenced in the Kakinte community, in oil and gas extraction plots in the Peruvian Amazon¹⁹ and even in the case of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant.²⁰

Ecological (re)patriarchalization refers to the disruption of life reproduction cycles caused by extractive activities.¹⁶ The social and environmental impacts of pollution, such as the contamination of water sources, affect the care work performed by women, resulting in an additional burden. Responsible for managing crops and animals and maintaining family life, women depend on access to water. According to projections, there is expected to be a reduction in water levels in the region of the Belo Monte dam, impacting the water table.²¹

Cultural (re)patriarchalization refers to the intensification of sexist representations and stereotypes that emerge with the installation of extractive megaprojects in territories.¹⁶ The massive arrival of men, whether workers linked to extractive companies, state agents, or military personnel, leads to male figures' occupation of public and collective spaces, altering social dynamics and establishing new regimes of power. This territorial reorganization results in the exclusion of women and children from previously shared spaces, generating feelings of insecurity and fear. In this sense, Marin and Oliveira²⁰ indicated that the construction of the Belo Monte Dam mobilized around 20,000 workers, and real estate prices in the Altamira region increased tenfold.

Women are restricted to the domestic space, with their mobility limited and their living space reduced. Federici²² calls this process "social enclosure", in which women are confined to the private environment, in a movement that reinforces the sexual separation of spaces and female subordination in the territory. Bodily (re) patriarchalization refers to social control and the intensification of sexist violence against women's bodies in extractive contexts.¹⁶ With the installation of megaprojects in underdeveloped regions, both bodies and territories become objects of appropriation, control, and violence, resulting in the masculinization of spaces and the intensification of gender inequalities.

In this context, women and girls become targets of threats, harassment, sexual assault, and other forms of violence, often perpetrated by workers involved in large-scale projects, private security companies, and public forces. Increased alcohol consumption contributes to the escalation of violence. In contrast, the establishment of brothels linked to the presence of companies increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections and reinforces the commodification of female bodies. In such scenarios, nature, as well as women's bodies, is

converted into sacrificial territory for the reproduction and expansion of capital.

Corroborating these aspects, Barroso²³ indicates that in Altamira (the city closest to the Belo Monte Power Plant) there were 610 rape cases between 2014 and 2020, the period in which the project was developed, with an average higher than the number of cases registered in the State of Pará. In 2024, according to the Atlas of Violence, Altamira was considered the sixth most violent city in the country, and several residents, when interviewed, associated this fact with the construction of the Belo Monte power plant. When observing what happened in Altamira, we realize that the Belo Monte project caused a series of social changes with the reconfiguration of the way of life and the worsening of cases of violence, corroborating the theses of (re) patriarchalization of territories, as systematized by Cruz Hernández and Jiménez¹⁶.

Belo Monte plant and the city of Altamira

The Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant (UHE) is located in the municipality of Altamira and in the Amazon biome and can be considered a concrete example of the impact of large projects on the environment, the living conditions of the local population, and, in particular, women. The Belo Monte hydroelectric plant is run-of-river, meaning it does not have a reservoir for water accumulation. Its installed capacity is over 11,000 megawatts.²⁴ Its design dates back to 1975, still during the military period. However, its contemporary implementation was resumed in 2001 with its final bidding process held in 2010, the inauguration of the first turbine in 2016, and the inauguration of the last in 2019.

The Belo Monte hydroelectric plant is considered the largest 100% Brazilian plant and has a budget of around 28 billion reais. Its justification is national development and energy security.²⁵ These military arguments were repeated in the civilian presidencies, in the governments of 3 Brazilian presidents Fernando Henrique, Lula, and Dilma, in which Belo Monte appears as an important mechanism for attracting foreign investment for national development.²⁶ Due to resistance from the region's communities and people, the project took time to plan and implement. The Belo Monte HPP was built in an Amazon region inhabited by riverside communities and Indigenous peoples such as the Juruna, Xikrin, and Arara.²⁷ The rise of left-wing parties to power in 2003 contributed to the disarticulation of local social movements in favor of a national development plan. In this sense, Brum²⁶ points to a strategy marked by development based on large-scale projects, in a colonizing vision of the Amazon.²⁶

The construction of the Belo Monte HPP had negative ecological, social, and economic impacts. We can highlight the ecological dimension, which impacted the region's natural resources; the social dimension, which resulted in the breakdown of social ties, increased violence, and crime; and the economic dimension, which impacted the purchasing power of riverside dwellers.²⁵ Based on the points raised by Brum²⁶ and Fainguelernt²⁵, we see how the thinking behind the implementation of the Plant implied an extractive proposal, considering the forest and its resources as a body to be explored without considering adequate mitigating measures to neutralize the negative impacts on the communities where they were carried out.

The 2017 Atlas of Violence, an official government publication, indicated that Altamira was the most violent city in Brazil in 2015, being the only city to have a rate of more than 100 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.²⁸ The increase in violence results in the destruction of emotional bonds, which also particularly impacts women. Altamira has experienced a substantial increase in female prostitution, as well

as an increase in rape and prostitution crimes among children and adolescents.²⁹

The implementation of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant is an example of how large projects reconfigure social, political, and ecological relations in Amazonian territories, with profound impacts on the environment and society and more intense ones on women. Based on the categories developed by several authors, including Cruz Hernández and Jiménez¹⁶ and the Collective Critical Views of the Territory from Feminism⁴, in the case of Belo Monte, we can notice that at least three dimensions of the (re)patriarchalization of territories were identified: ecological, cultural, and corporal. The ecological dimension is expressed in the rupture of the cycles that sustain life's reproduction, with the contamination of water, the reduction of fishing fauna, and the compromise of the livelihoods of riverside populations.²⁵

The cultural dimension manifested itself in reorganizing social spaces and roles based on the masculinization of the territory. The massive arrival of workers linked to the construction site, combined with militarized control and surveillance, reinforced sexist stereotypes and displaced women from the public space to the domestic sphere, restricting their mobility and community protagonism. As Brum²⁶ and Fainguelernt²⁵ pointed out, the increase in prostitution, sexual violence, and trafficking of women and girls is related to the installation of the plant.

The (re)patriarchalization of the body was evident through the violent control of women's bodies. The significant increase in cases of rape and prostitution of adolescents, documented in local and national reports,^{29,30} highlighted the transformation of female bodies into sacrificial territories, as analyzed by Segato.⁵ In this context, sexual violence functions as an instrument of domination that permeates large-scale exploitation projects, operating as a brutal expression of the logic of appropriation and disciplining of bodies and territories.

Final considerations

The case of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant revealed how large development projects with deficient analysis of environmental and social impacts, according to Santos et al.,³¹ generated profound social changes, including the patriarchal reconfiguration of territories, in which women's bodies and nature are treated as resources to be exploited. As Cruz Hernández and Jiménez¹⁶ state, understanding the multiple dimensions of (re)patriarchalization is essential to unveil the mechanisms of domination that sustain megaprojects in Latin America. After the end of the 1990s, with the increase in globalization in Latin America, large-scale natural resource exploration projects began to be implemented, such as mining, agribusiness, and energy generation. Although promoted under the discourse of development, these projects have caused profound restructuring of the social fabric, especially due to the way they reproduce and deepen historical inequalities. Among their effects, the (re)patriarchalization of territories stands out — a process of reestablishment and strengthening of patriarchal logics that manifest themselves in five interconnected dimensions: political, economic, ecological, cultural, and corporal.¹⁶

Still in the process of conceptual consolidation, these dimensions reveal the structural intertwining of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, articulating forms of domination that most intensely affect women and traditional communities. From this perspective, it is possible to understand how Latin American territories impacted by megaprojects, such as the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, experience a setback in power relations beyond the economic sphere, affecting bodies, ways of life, and community ties. By treating nature

as a body to be exploited, extractive and environmental projects also disregard the profound social impacts that fall, above all, on women. These projects, although legitimized by the discourse of modernization, employment, and economic growth, if implemented without protective measures for the communities, promote the plundering of natural resources, disrupt community life, and impose work overloads on women, especially in care activities. In addition, the masculinization of territories generates increased violence, social isolation, and the invisibility of women's voices in decisions about the present and future of their communities.^{5,22}

On the other hand, women's movements have played a fundamental role in resisting environmental extractive projects, not only by denouncing violence and inequality, but also by building sustainable alternatives based on greater environmental justice, community solidarity, and the defense of territories. By articulating body, territory, and life, these women confront the predatory logic imposed and reconfigure the meanings of development by challenging the backward structures still hegemonic in Latin America.³²⁻⁴¹

This study also shows the need to develop social and environmental impact studies for large extractive projects. This aspect is of great importance today, especially since many Latin American countries have reserves of rare metals that should be explored soon.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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