



IGARAPÉ INSTITUTE
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CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE AMAZON THROUGH THE VOICES OF WOMEN DEFENDERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT



Brazil

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Introduction

“Social injustice, economic inequality, cultural disparities, the voracious forces of patriarchy and capitalism, and the geopolitical dimension of the Amazon represents in relation to the world, placing us on the geographical periphery, made me want to walk there and plant my feet.”

- Defender residing in the urban Amazonia

“The Amazon is not just water, just fish, just trees. It has people.”

- Defender residing in a quilombo in the pressured forested Amazon.

“When a woman is born in the Amazon, a defender is born.”

- Defender residing in an agroextractivist reserve in the pressured forested Amazon

“Women, when you feel alone and vulnerable, close your eyes, huddle, place your hand on the earth, talk to Mother Earth, let her hear your cries, and listen as she speaks to you. Listen to the wind, listen to the forest, listen to the rivers, listen to the birds singing, listen to all our ancestors who dwell within the forest, those who have already left and are taking care of us. Then you will know that your voice will resonate, don't be afraid, don't be afraid to speak out, to express opinions, to suggest, to voice your criticism. We, Indigenous women, are the change in this world. Rest assured that we have a network that cradles all these women, and we are not alone. We are always together, holding each other's hands.”

- Defender residing in an Indigenous Land in the forested Amazon

In the Amazon, women face a dual challenge. On one side, there are social expectations regarding their role in society; on the other, the risks and vulnerabilities that the multiplicity of identities they belong to can create. These expectations significantly impact how they see and face the challenges that surround them.

At the same time, these identities related to the regional context they live in and other social markers – such as age, social class, sexual orientation, gender identity,¹ race, ethnicity, religion, among others – add unique experiences and specific risks. The collection of experiences of these women cannot, therefore, be generalized, placing them in a key position to propose solutions. This work (1) aims to identify the vision of Amazonian women on their territory and its challenges, as well as (2) highlight the solutions they propose, considering their peculiarities and diversity.

To construct this perspective, 23 women engaged in the defense of human rights and the environment were interviewed between October 2022 and April 2023. A focus group was also conducted in Marabá (PA) in December 2022. Based on this exercise of listening, data collection, and systematization of information, along with related bibliographical review, we have arrived at the following conclusions:

- Defenders have a profound connection with their territory. This bond transcends the notion of ownership as property and assumes a spiritual relationship of interdependence, sustenance, and protection. This relationship is particularly present among traditional peoples, such as Indigenous and Quilombola communities, but is a constant perception among all the interviewees and focus group participants, including those living in urban areas. The territory is thus an intrinsic part of their identity. It is in the defense of this space, whether for human rights, environmental preservation, or biodiversity protection, that they mobilize and engage politically.
- Women living in the North Region face common challenges, but the complexity of these challenges intensifies when intersecting with other identities and regional specificities, particularly regarding the availability, access, and quality of services offered.
- Areas under pressure due to the ecosystem of environmental crimes present additional challenges, as violence or threats are tools often used by those committing offenses. The impact of this hostile environment is felt in the bodies of Amazonian women, whether through the normalization of violence in their communities or through its direct use as a means of coercion.
- Women and the organizations they lead play a crucial role in resisting these forms of violence, protecting the biome, and promoting sustainable practices of subsistence, production, and consumption, which are determining factors in mitigating climate change.² However, there is little recognition and support for these initiatives.
- Women are subjected to various subtle forms of violence due to their activism and the gender roles assigned to them. Those who do not conform to a role in the private sphere and act publicly against the expropriation of the forest and its resources and against the violation of the rights of local peoples are the most affected. According to the defenders interviewed by the Igarapé Institute, 51% of those working in the Brazilian Amazon reported having experienced some form of violence,³ ranging from physical and psychological to domestic and sexual aggressions. Between 2012 and 2021, 32 defenders were murdered,⁴ with the majority in land conflicts in which the identity of the aggressor often remains uncertain.

The report is divided into four parts. In the first part, we address the context of the Brazilian Amazon, where this research was conducted. In the second part, we explain the methodology used for this listening process. In the third part, we highlight the risks and challenges identified by the defenders who participated in the research. Finally, we describe the solutions suggested by these same women, along with recommendations on how the incorporation of a gender perspective into discussions about sustainable development in the region is essential for navigating the context of climate change and promoting peace and stability.

The Amazons Within the Amazon

To comprehend the specific challenges faced by Amazonian women defenders, it is essential to understand the Amazon territory,⁵ the relationship of local populations with it, and finally, how the Amazonian identity can bring additional risks and challenges for certain groups, particularly women from traditional communities.

Though the Amazon has always been a subject of fascination and driven both public and private initiatives for exploration – not always with positive impacts – the region has recently gained growing international attention. In times of climate emergency, the world's largest tropical forest plays a crucial role in climate regulation. It contributes to creating favorable climate conditions, both regionally and globally, through the hydrological mechanism that releases water into the atmosphere through its plants and rivers.⁶

In this context, Brazil holds a privileged position, as it alone houses 64% of the entire Amazon. This equals approximately 5 million square kilometers (59% of the national territory),⁷ 20% of the world's biodiversity, 20% of global freshwater reservoirs,⁸ and a population of over 190 indigenous peoples⁹ and other traditional communities, including quilombolas and riverside dwellers.¹⁰ At the same time, this region of the country holds 59% of all land conflicts recorded in Brazil in 2022.¹¹ Four of the five states with the highest number of land conflicts are in the Legal Amazon. The impact of these conflicts on local populations is vast and disproportionately affects women.

But where and why do these conflicts occur? In reality, the Brazilian Amazon region is as diverse as it is large, with socioeconomic and natural differences mainly related to vegetation cover impacting the prevalence of these conflicts.¹²

The region known as the **Forested Amazon**, which accounts for 39% of the Brazilian Amazon territory (mainly in the states of Amazonas and northern Pará), sees fewer conflicts. This area is less populated and has the lowest deforestation rate, with only 5% of forest cover deforested. On the other hand, the **Pressured Forested Amazon**, covering 29% of the territory, is one of the main stages for conflicts. This region retains 75% of the standing forest but faces disputes and, consequently, an accelerated deforestation process, illegal logging, gold mining, and land grabbing.

The **Deforested Amazon**, covering 11% of the Legal Amazon, has lost over 70% of its original forest. These areas are often underutilized or abandoned, with the exception of protected areas.¹³ There is also the **Non-Forested Amazon**,¹⁴ which corresponds to 21% of the territory and is located in Mato Grosso, Tocantins, and Roraima. This region is mainly covered by cerrado vegetation and natural fields. Lastly, the Urban Amazon, characterized by large cities, is home to 76% of the local population.

The ecosystem of environmental crimes in the Amazon¹⁵ and the pressure exerted by legitimate economies have different impacts across these regions, threatening local peace and security.¹⁶ Under the pretext of economic development, large projects justify displacements and land invasions, the halting of territorial demarcation processes, continuous deforestation, and river pollution.¹⁷ This scenario, combined with the competition for local resources and exploitation resulting from the complex ecosystem of environmental crimes – which encompasses illegal mining, land-grabbing, wildlife trafficking, and the presence of drug-trafficking factions – jeopardizes the living conditions

of local populations. Furthermore, the impact is particularly severe and differentiated for women. This panorama has intensified with the rollback of democracy in Brazil, which has compromised the institutions' capacity to combat environmental crimes.¹⁸

In 2022, 926 land conflicts and 128 water conflicts were recorded in the Amazon.¹⁹ In this context, there were 34 homicides, 87 attempted homicides, and 123 threats. Of the 34 recorded deaths, five were women (15%). Pará, Maranhão e Amazonas account for 56% of the region's land and water conflicts.²⁰ Rondônia and Maranhão lead the ranking of homicides, with seven lives lost in each. Data from the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) indicate that indigenous peoples are the most affected, at 38%, followed by landless individuals at 20%, and environmentalists at 9%.

An analysis conducted by the Igarapé Institute on this database revealed that, only between 2012 and 2022, there were 765 attacks against women in the Legal Amazon²¹ due to rural conflicts, mostly in the form of death threats. This number includes intimidation, imprisonment, attempted murder and the murder of 36 women. The majority of the perpetrators are land grabbers and farmers. The cases are concentrated in Pará, Maranhão, and Rondônia, particularly in the municipalities of Altamira (PA), Formosa da Serra Negra (MA), and Porto Velho (RO).

It is evident that violence is a part of the daily lives of the local population, especially in areas under pressure, or even in large urban centers. However, the impact of this violence on women is less visible and is sometimes not even quantified. While state and national public databases on violence against women lack disaggregated and geographically detailed data, there are no systematic records of violence committed against women defenders, which does not mean that they do not experience violence. The types of violence that most affect women in the region are often silent and are frequently not properly addressed by protection programs.²²

In addition to the violence stemming from territorial disputes and protection, these women face another type of violence resulting from gender inequality and the impacts they suffer when they defy traditional gender roles. In fact, these women are not just survivors of violence. They play a central role in environmental preservation, defending rights, and mitigating climate change.²³ Much like the violence they endure, their contribution is neither adequately recognized nor documented.

With the aim of bringing these silent trends to light, this work presented essential elements collected from conversations with at least 23 women defenders. We will discuss our research methodology next, and then present their perspective on the challenges of their territories and possible solutions.

Methodology

This research is based on a participatory approach using focus groups and in-depth interviews. The Igarapé Institute team conducted a focus group with eight environmental and human rights women defenders of Marabá, in the state of Pará, on December 10, 2022, and 23 interviews (11 indigenous women, five quilombola women, five rural workers, and two urban activists) between December 2022 and April 2023.

For the purposes of this study, we focused on women defenders primarily from areas under pressure. While not all of the interviewed defenders live in these territories, many are familiar with them, either due to geographical proximity or because they were forced to leave these areas in the past, or due to the causes they advocate for. Based on the analysis of the previously mentioned conflict incidences and violence rates, we selected the states of Acre, Amazonas, Maranhão, Pará, Rondônia, and Roraima as the research focus. However, due to the difficulty in locating a defender with the appropriate profile and time availability for this research in Rondônia, this state was not represented in the interviews conducted.

For data collection and analysis, we used some participatory research techniques, especially the so-called Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). The main goal of this methodology is to involve local populations in formulating solutions for their respective territories. In this way, the participants jointly determine which challenges they consider most important to achieve sustainable development in a particular locality, and then identify the solutions they believe are most suitable to overcome them. Three main techniques were used for this purpose:

- Social and Territorial Mapping: This technique involves characterizing the populations residing in a particular territory, as well as their primary geographical characteristics. Thus, each defender introduced themselves, talked about the work she does, and described her area of action, including their origin and current location.
- Classification of Key Challenges: The interviewees were invited to discuss the main challenges in their territory and how these affect their daily lives. At the end, within the focus group context, an exercise of prioritization was proposed, in which each defender indicated the challenges she deemed most relevant.
- Classification of Solutions: At this stage, the goal was to identify the types of solutions each defender believed to be most effective in overcoming local challenges. The aim was to promote local ownership of effective solutions to common problems. In the focus group, the defenders were asked to prioritize the solutions they saw as having the most potential effectiveness in addressing the challenges already identified.

The focus group brought together women defenders from different territories in Pará, including white, indigenous, black, and even quilombola women. Efforts were made to ensure this diversity. The research teams paired local defenders, who are contracted by Igarapé, with researchers from the Institute itself. This discussion was organized in partnership with the Zé Cláudio and Maria Institute (IZM), whose presidency is held by one of the defenders.

Regarding the interviews, they were conducted by the defenders acting as consultants for Igarapé and by the Igarapé team. To ensure methodological unity, topics on research ethics, confidentiality, and security were shared with the consultant defenders during a research seminar promoted by the Igarapé Institute in September 2022. A base questionnaire was developed by the Igarapé team and distributed among them. All interviews conducted by them were recorded, and the audio records shared in accordance with the General Data Protection Law. Subsequently, the interviews were coded and analyzed using a qualitative analysis tool that identified the most relevant excerpts for the purpose of this research. The subsequent analysis is based on data collected both in the focus group and in the interviews.

The Challenges Through their Eyes

The interviews with the defenders revealed a deep connection between their identity and the territory in which they live. Whether it's the Amazon as a whole, this macro territory, or the specific Amazonian territory in which they inhabit, with its geographical peculiarities. In addition to this territorial identity, there is a cultural identity linked to their traditional community, race, ethnicity, and other identity markers. Finally, gender and the roles associated with it add the final layer to the identity of these women, influencing their place and experience in the Amazonian territory.

“My relationship with the territory is everything, it's cultural, social, and political. How is it cultural? Through our traditions, our rituals, our shamanism, our medicinal plants, our midwives, our healers. Through everything that transforms into spirituality and the ancestry of our Tupinambá people. And it's political because I am an indigenous leader. Being a woman, I am an indigenous woman who brings other women into the movement. And socially: we help with education, healthcare, and other related issues within the territory for development, and also as a means of income and sustainability for families within the territory, within the village.”

- Indigenous defender residing in the pressured Amazon

Therefore, these overlapping identities, starting with the territory and combined with others, profoundly influence the perceived challenges, the risks and vulnerabilities faced, and consequently, the proposed solutions.

Based on this understanding, we identified three major common challenges:

- Identity, Inclusion, and the State

This challenge reflects the State's difficulty in understanding and dealing with the geographical, cultural, and identity-related characteristics of the Amazonian territory. As a result, there is limited presence in the Amazon region and services that aren't very inclusive for communities and individuals from the region's traditional peoples.

- The Centrality of the Struggle for Territory

The territory is a central element of identity for the peoples and individuals of the Amazon. Therefore, the challenges faced in these territories directly impact the very existence of the women interviewed, focusing on the presence of economic relationships, both legal and illegal, which often clash with the traditional communities' way of life and the rights of women.

- The Amazonian Woman

The challenges faced by women and girls in the Amazon region are linked to gender roles and social expectations imposed on them. In addition to widespread violence, many women defenders highlighted the challenges they face when taking on leadership positions in a region marked by territorial conflicts.

Identity, Inclusion, and the State

The diversity of the Amazon region brings with it structural challenges inherent to its unique geographical layout and its broad multicultural, ethnic, and racial representation. Among the challenges highlighted by the women interviewed is the absence of adequate inclusion policy and an intersectional approach to the region's public policies, particularly one that understands and addresses the specific risks and vulnerabilities presented by certain identity markers generated by women who reside in that territory. It is argued that these groups have limited access to services and are often judged for their habits, rituals, clothing, and physical aspects, like hair and adornments. In the case of Black women, there's mention of prejudice against turbans and "afro" hairstyles. Indigenous women, on the other hand, complain that there's a romanticization and hypersexualization that discredits them and affects their fights.

“I often say that I dress every day in an iron armor. Because it's not easy to leave the house wearing a turban of this size. It's not easy to leave the house with an Afro necklace. It's not easy to leave the house in colorful clothing. It's not easy. I have to wear, over or under my clothes, an iron armor. Sometimes, I feel like I'm wearing blinders, like those put on horses to make them look straight ahead. And even a chinrest so I don't bow my head. All of this is confrontation. I go through this every day of my life.”

- Defender residing in a quilombo in the Amazon under pressure

Many participants believe that the State is complicit in social exclusion practices, intentionally reducing the provision of basic public services to rural populations, especially when it comes to members of often stigmatized social movements, such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB). Historically marginalized populations, like indigenous and quilombola communities, often feel excluded from the state public policies. Reports range from serious allegations of human rights violations that seem to be left unaddressed, to difficulties in obtaining replacement identification documents.

In the realm of education, barriers are multiple: difficulties accessing education due to a variety of factors, including the limited formal education availability in their territories, the lack of basic materials for teachers and students, to a limited knowledge about educational methods adapted to each population's ways of life. Even when they gain access to education, many of these individuals feel the need to join student movements to fight for inclusive policies and cultural recognition within academic environments, especially in universities, which are often exclusionary and perpetuate stereotypical views about traditional peoples. There are reports, for example, of dance performances being banned due to the body expression and use of traditional adornments.

“Often, they only listen to us as indigenous people from the moment you hold a position, a role, or a diploma, so you can raise your voice and speak. Many times, indigenous people suffer and cannot cry out for help, because the authorities tend to turn a deaf ear and only listen to someone with a higher social status or prestige to engage in dialogue with them.”

- Indigenous defender residing in the forested Amazon

In the realm of healthcare, there was mention to a lack of respect and consideration of ancestral practices, values, and beliefs that should be integrated into the services provided and the development of health programs. Beyond general neglect, as there are no quality facilities or teams serving the various territories, there are additional barriers faced by these populations to access these services and use them fully. We heard reports of harassment against indigenous women when taking their children to hospitals, refusals to provide certificates based on racial criteria, and difficulties in obtaining medical care and treatment due to stigmatization by the healthcare staff. It's worth noting that in many cases, some of these individuals have overlapping identities, intensifying challenges and prejudices, such as members of traditional peoples with disabilities.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were also discussed in detail by the participants. After all, Brazil was an epicenter of the global health crisis. With a government that disregarded scientifically proven effective measures, we recorded one of the highest death tolls from the disease. The North Region, and particularly traditional peoples, were disproportionately affected. In addition to delay in accessing healthcare and basic prevention information, they also struggled to promptly receive emergency aid and faced elevated risks while seeking means of subsistence for their families. Added to this scenario are the impacts on mental health, given the high incidence of suicides among indigenous people and the lack of a specific public policy to address this issue.

“The worst government in Brazil happened alongside the pandemic. It seemed like a hurricane sweeping everything away. I was the first person who had Covid in the community and was treated by a Cuban doctor at CONAQ.²⁴ Our community was the only one with a cellphone, so people came, and the Covid spread. We had to set up a sanitary barrier; we were the first territory to do that. We went from April 14th to July 1st with the territory closed, with no case of Covid within the territory. It was a fight for survival, not just to avoid getting Covid, because we lost access to food. It was either to harvest food and sell it to feed your family and catch Covid, or go hungry and not get infected. I spent days and nights explaining the emergency aid, creating email accounts, providing cellphones, giving access to SIM cards, everything.”

- Defender residing in a quilombo located in the pressured Amazon region

Another topic highly discussed was obstetric violence and high maternal and infant mortality rates in specific areas mentioned by the participants. These areas are seen as examples of the State's neglect toward women's health and prejudice against traditional peoples. The research team of the Igarapé Institute received a dossier detailing dozens of cases of deaths of mothers and babies at a maternity ward in the city of Marabá. Since then, numerous news stories on the subject have been reported in the press.²⁵

In highlighting the negligence by the state, one of the most emphasized challenges by the participants is the lack of due legal process in several cases involving government intervention in episodes related to massacres, pesticide contamination, murders, and threats, among others.

“And these deaths where you don't see any of the perpetrators of the crimes arrested, let alone the mastermind. You don't see the state government taking a stand, giving an interview saying, ‘We will work on the investigations to clarify all crimes against indigenous and quilombola leaders in this state, so that their instigators are punished, as well as their executors.’ Never. The government doesn't take a position. Faced with a such a situation, it's a government that is complicit in what's happening. Unfortunately, this is our reality.”

- Defender residing in a quilombo located in the pressured Amazon

In addition to the general challenge of dealing with the constant presence of organized crime, there are other issues, such as the scarcity of Women's Specialized Police Stations (Delegacias Especializadas no Atendimento à Mulher - DEAMs) operating 24 hours, the absence of the Federal Police on borders and traditional territories, and the need for more appropriate treatment by law enforcement professionals to victims and offenders who are members of traditional peoples.

Many challenges mentioned by the interviewed women relate to the Brazilian State's difficulty in providing essential services to a markedly multicultural population, which is set in a territory with geographical specificities that impose additional challenges. The state already struggles to reach its entire population, even in urban centers in the southeast of the country. However, it is important to emphasize that the stories highlighted here underline the clash between a Westernized state and local traditional cultures. There's an apparent inability to implement inclusive policies, compromising the fulfillment of the basic functions of the State, which are at the core of its constitutional obligations.

The Centrality of the Struggle for Territory

The pressure in the Amazon is not recent. However, the current scenario, marked by severe and recurring violations of the Amazon biome at a time when the world is seeking consensus for a more sustainable coexistence on the planet, provides an opportunity to listen to a segment of the population that is often ignored. The challenges related to the territory go beyond the presence of illegal groups and resource disputes. They include treating the Amazon territory as a commodity to be commercialized, disregarding the ancestral relationship of traditional and local communities with this land.

“For us, indigenous peoples, our territory – which we call territory, which is our biome, and it can be any of the six biomes – is our life. Our mother. It’s a part of us, an extension of our bodies. So, every time they burn the territory, deforest the territory, it’s as if they are burning our bodies. When they place mining rafts in the rivers, it’s like they are clogging our veins. We feel so connected to the territory that’s why we always wear our ornaments, our seeds, our feathers because they remind us of our territory, that we are part of our territory. It doesn’t matter where we are, I can be in Bahia, I can be in São Paulo, I can be in Rio de Janeiro, I can cross the ocean and be in Europe, but I know I have a territory. I know where I have to return, what I am doing, and what I am defending.”

– Indigenous defender residing in urban Amazonia

Within this context, it's clear that Amazonian women have played a significant role in discussing rights, land regularization, and preservation in their territories. Whether in camps related to agrarian reform, women's groups from traditional communities, collectives dedicated to sustainable agriculture and agroforestry, or through civil society organizations,²⁶ these women have been active voices. They believe that information, education, and community engagement can contribute to transforming the predatory relationship with the Amazonian territory as a whole.

However, they report that they have been facing increasing risks, both individually and collectively. According to them, the aggressors seek ways to displace families from their territories and instill fear in community members to deter them from leading the fight for the land. In situations of direct confrontation, territories are invaded and set on fire, resulting in the destruction of crops and houses, along with all clothes, food, cell phones, documents, and other valuable belongings of families. Even more concerning is that entire families, including children, pregnant women, and the elderly, as well as their pets, face threats, physical assaults, and even murder. In their testimonies, the defenders reveal the fear they live with, citing intimidations ranging from hit-and-run threats to

gunshots fired in front of the churches they attend and, in the specific case of criminal factions, the display of disturbing images such as a still-beating heart.

“When we women speak out against illegal mining, we feel threatened for expressing our thoughts to society. Especially when we have a voice in social movements, as activists.”

- Indigenous defender living in the Amazon rainforest

“When you don’t submit, you can be at risk, depending on how you position yourself on certain contentious issues, especially those involving large enterprises. [...] These are tense moments, where you take a stand, and suddenly might find yourself in a threatening situation, an attempt at silencing [...] I feel brave, but I don’t feel safe. [...] I’m a very cautious person and very aware that every fight needs must have strategies, a direction, a purpose. Things are not random. You have to think about your safety and of others. You can’t be irresponsible. Activism demands a great deal of consistency from us, and I am aware of this risk, the insecurity, not feeling safe, and also that I have to be responsible because my actions, my stance, can affect the lives of other people, including my family. So, I always have to weigh my actions and my activism.”

- Defender residing in a quilombo located in the pressured Amazon

The actions of farmers, land grabbers, and squatters, including through illicit means, are well-known, especially in the absence of proper normative framework for protection. They frequently operate on the fringes of the law, “terrorizing the local population, particularly the black amazonian woman, as a way to drive them out of their territories.” This is one of the most striking aspects of the Amazonian reality, highlighting the threats faced by its communities. Women, in particular, face disproportionate and specific challenges in this context. According to the research participants, there is an intrinsic connection between “large properties and violence,” as the clash between land and environmental defenders and farmers largely arises from the lack of territorial regulation that guarantees the rights of traditional peoples, and land ownership for sustainable economies in harmony with the forest.

“What we have most is conflict with farmers and gunmen. We need to make the community aware that farmers are not our friends. I even organized a seminar to talk about environmental justice. (Which doesn’t really exist; what exists is environmental racism). Talking about this in the territories, causing impact, brings risks (our names are at stake). They have firearms but we have wisdom, which is worse than a firearm.”

- Defender living in a quilombo in the Amazon under pressure

“At the time, a comrade and I were in charge of the camp. I fled alone, and my children fled later, and only the youngest was left in the crib, at whom they pointed a gun. When I was about to run, they said ‘you’re done,’ but they didn’t know who I was. They thought I was an ordinary person and let me go. Some colleagues tried to get my child, and they threatened to throw her into the blazing pickup where they were putting the animals. They said they wouldn’t hand over the child if it wasn’t to the mother. They pushed the women. But a student managed to save my daughter, putting a sheet over her head and running. I tried to go back to get my daughter, to exchange my life for hers, but my comrades didn’t allow it. They said they wouldn’t be able to save her from all that armed men. I think that was the most difficult moment in the land struggle. It puts us in another context because we women are placed elsewhere. We are in the confrontation, but we are also mothers, wives. When we see one of our children being threatened with death, we don’t easily forget.”

- Defender living in the deforested Amazon

In the Amazon, strong women emerge as leaders in land movements, serving as role models for other defenders. They believe that fighting for land rights goes beyond individual, family, and community interests. For them, it is crucial to end the various inequalities in the Amazon, and to do that, it is necessary to break with the existing land structure. They argue that families need to organize themselves to collectively claim the no-commercialization of land, as they believe that land should not be a commodity, but rather a common good that should serve the collective good and integrate people’s identity.

“When I defend my territory, I’m defending it for myself because it’s my territory, but I’m also defending it for my son, my grandchildren to come, for my nieces and nephews who are there and those who will be born. So I need to do it in a way that when they come, they find the territory, and they don’t have to go through the same struggles I’m going through. I don’t want to be in this fight forever. I want one day to return home and not have a fence to cross. I want one day to return home, and the stream isn’t dry because the rice farmer pulled the water. I want one day to return home and eat the fish that’s in the stream without poisoning. I don’t want this fight forever. That’s why I’m here today, that’s why I persist.”

- Defender residing in a quilombo in the Amazon under pressure

In addition to the well-known challenges, there is the increasing presence of illegal armed groups – notably drug trafficking, militias, and illegal miners – that intensify risks and threats to local populations, with a focus on women. Beyond frequent violent practices, which serious consequences for women and girls, the presence of these heavily armed men has led to the occupation of significant parts of the traditional peoples’ territory, restricting access to these remote areas within the forest. This situation worsened with the arrival of faction members from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in the Northern Region’s prisons. Reflecting the strengthening of factions, research participants report that initiation rituals in these groups are marked by violence, and are based on the construction of violent masculinities. This reality has direct consequences on the violation of rights and the physical integrity of people living in the region.

“It’s not just about losing the right to come and go within your own territory. It’s these violent practices, you know. It seems like to join the faction, a guy needs to kill someone. It doesn’t matter who. Our lives are at risk not only because we can be victimized out of nowhere, but also because these rituals bring the normalization of violence in an environment that is already sexist. It’s already based on the construction of man as a violent being.”

- Defender living in a deforested Amazonian quilombo

In addition to drug and arms trafficking, there is illegal mining, and rumors of human trafficking through the rivers of the Amazon. There’s also deforestation for animal and timber trafficking, as well as illegal fishing. In these latter cases, there’s pointed complicity of the public authorities and the involvement of farmers and the so-called “agromilitia,” defined by participants as undercover police officers acting with agribusiness. In a moving account, an Indigenous woman shared how these groups seek the support from traditional peoples who, in situations of vulnerability and scarcity, end up being complicit in various forms of gender-based violence against women and girls, especially indigenous.

“I was there to do other things with my relatives. But I went through a certain place where I saw our the very relatives handing over a little girl to a miner. She was very young. Used as a bargaining chip. I wanted to cry, to do something. But I just took a deep breath, pretended I didn’t see, and moved on. I don’t know what was more violent, seeing the scene or pretending I didn’t see it to keep access to that territory.”

- Indigenous defender residing in urban Amazonia

As the data suggests, the challenges associated with Amazonian territories are immense and pose direct threats to the safety and rights of local populations. Gender-related issues result in a disproportionate and specific effect on women and girls who lack adequate protection frameworks.

The Amazonian Woman

Worldwide, women who question traditional gender roles face threats. The Amazon is no exception. Beyond generalized violence against women, which places the Amazonian states at the top of the sexual violence ranking,²⁷ women in leadership positions face various forms of violence used as strategies to silence them and push them back into traditional roles and subordinate positions.

“When we take on the leadership role in the indigenous movement, specially as an indigenous women, there is no security. There is instability both within and outside the indigenous territory because our fight and our cause is one; it unites us, unites all indigenous women. (...) the reports of abuse, violence against women, children, the elderly, and young people, it affects many people, not just men, but governance, rights. So we end up feeling insecure in this sense, there is no safety for us, it is a threat to life, right? So yes, there is this issue, but we don’t stop.”

- Indigenous defender residing in urban Amazon

This violence, often subtle, has perverse effects on these women’s actions, even within their homes. While these acts arise as a response to the growing political role these women decide to publicly assume, aggressors can be close people – family, partners, and friends. At the same time, there are also anonymous aggressors involved in legal and illegal economies putting pressure on the Amazon biome. As a result, we observe subtle and not-so-subtle violence, direct and indirect, accumulating against these women who play a fundamental role in defending their territory and biome. But why does this happen?

Historically and socially constructed gender roles affect everyone, impacting even more women with other identity markers. These dynamics in Amazonian territories bring specific challenges to the leadership exercise by women defenders, given the region’s unique cultural multiplicity and geographical characteristics, encompassing rural, riverine, urban, indigenous, or quilombola women. Research participants reported that the process of being accepted as leaders was violent and marked by invisibility, delegitimization, and silencing of their protagonism. Such challenges take on different layers due to the diversity of their identities, such as LGBTQIA+, indigenous, quilombola, or young women. By positioning themselves as leaders and protagonists, these women challenge traditional gender roles, thus becoming victims of various types of violence, including domestic violence. This insecurity often drives them away from their work and causes or seriously impacts their mental health. Those who persist in the struggle, in many cases, are forced to leave their territories.

“When we say that society is sexist, patriarchal, we are not just talking about the right or far-right. We are talking about a society, a social structure... And the place of women, this position of women as leaders, of women who speaks, is a place that is conquered through women’s confrontation... When we are women and we are fighting, we need to assert ourselves. And when we come from a violent territory, the first thing demanded from us is not to be afraid.”

- Defender living in deforested Amazon

“Being a woman and indigenous, prejudice carries a double burden. Because even if you are a woman who studies, a woman with principles and values, who does an excellent job, people always put you on the fringes of society because you are a woman, because you are indigenous. You’re always in that dilemma of proving your ability to develop and handle any activity that may be assigned. Your ability is always in question because you’re a woman and, above all, because you’re indigenous.”

- Indigenous defender living in the deforested Amazon

“When they deny our space to speak, it’s also a violent way to try to silence us. When they use our space and our voice to distort what is really a fight because we can’t want to be in a bigger space without the approval of other people, other leaders. And if there’s a small group, the attack against us is greater. And what saddens me most is when an indigenous woman also attacks.”

- Indigenous defender living in the forested Amazon

In these cases, the aggressors are often very close people, and as a result, some women take refuge in solitude and isolation as defense mechanisms.

“I’m used to being alone to avoid having someone controlling me. I had to create defense mechanisms to survive. I have the expression of an angry woman to survive. And I’m judged for that.”

- Defender living in a quilombo in the pressured Amazon

In this context, women defenders challenge social rules, often being compared to men for being “determined, tough, independent, and fearless.” At the same time, the research participants emphasized that women themselves do not reflect on what it means to be a woman, especially an Amazonian woman. This lack of information, combined with insufficient sexual education, makes it difficult to break social patterns, putting women of different generations in a vicious cycle. In this cycle, many drop out of school at a young age, often due to early pregnancies, and between the ages of 20 and 30 they have more than five children. In contrast, many men abandon their families without giving any explanation or support.

“People always look at us as warriors, always as strong, and they never loom at our vulnerabilities... because we always have to be strong, we have to show we are strong to get this space as a rights defender, and especially to bring more women in. It is very challenging, very challenging indeed. I think being a woman defender is defining your word, self-challenging, you know? So that we can conquer this space. Because it’s very easy for people to value someone when they are in a place like Sônia’s [Guajajara], but it’s also very easy to criticize, simply because she’s a woman. And it hurts a lot, because, for example, I follow many women and always see how challenging it is to be a mother and a chief, to be a leader and have to juggle all of that. A mother can’t leave her child because they already say it’s abandonment. A mother can’t leave the house much because it’s abandonment as well. And then come the criticisms from the movement.”

- Indigenous defender living in the forested Amazon

Women who study, separate, or work face the exhausting reality of double shifts. Some defender who are mothers report having spent nights in lines trying to secure a spot in school or a medical appointment since they lack third-party support. They feel that to defend themselves, they need to learn to be self-sufficient in every aspect of life, and they notice that their struggles are often invisible to society.²⁸

To the subtle gender-related violence, direct violence is also prevalent, both causing harmful effects on these women’s physical and psychological integrity. Many defenders interviewed reported being victims of sexual, domestic, and intra-family violence. In some cases, the experiences of violence were so traumatic that today they prefer not to get directly involved with the subject.

They report that many women are still unaware of their rights, cannot identify situations of violence, and maintain dependent relationships with abusive and violent partners due to strong prejudice against separated women. Underreporting is high, and the lack of State action regarding reported cases brings additional complications.

“I am a victim of sexual violence: I was raped when I was 9 years old. My vulnerability started there, due to depression, anxiety, among other problems that this violence brought to me as a child. The indigenous movement was a door that opened for me, also to help me heal - not to heal me exactly, but to make my coexistence with all this a bit easier throughout most of my life.”

- Indigenous defender residing in the forested Amazon

Women Defenders Propose Solutions

The daily work carried out by many of these women, who often do not see themselves or recognize themselves as defenders, plays a fundamental role in strengthening social fabric, promoting sustainable means of production, and in the defense of fundamental rights. In this context, we seek to identify the solutions proposed by them, based on their experiences and the role they have in society. These are proposals to solve challenges that affect everyone. Below, we present those that were set as a priority by a group of women in Marabá.

For the Brazilian State, the defenders suggested:

- **State presence and improvement in service delivery for indigenous peoples and rural populations**

In general, public institutions need to fulfill their constitutional role in the northern part of the country, considering, especially, that traditional peoples require differentiated services, developed indirect collaboration with beneficiaries. A primary concern is the support and monitoring provided by the National Indian Foundation (Funai) concerning various types of violence committed against indigenous peoples. In matters of health (including mental health initiatives), education, and accessibility (encompassing transportation, cell phone signal, and broadband internet), and always taking into account the specificities of the populations, it reinforces the lack of access to essential services due to inadequate infrastructure in communities and prevailing biases.

It is crucial to reflect on the model adopted for building new roads, energy distribution, and the traditional development model, which amplifies disorderly occupation, social conflicts, and deforestation. Solutions need to be based on the extensive network of navigable rivers²⁹ in the region, promoting improvements in river transportation, as well as investment in renewable energy sources, replacing fossil fuels.

To address these challenges, defenders have created projects and organized meetings, workshops, and fairs aiming to change perceptions about traditional peoples. These initiatives also aim to improve educational and healthcare institutions, considering their realities inside and outside communities. They are integrating municipal and state secretariats to provide differentiated services, improve the quality of facilities, also advocating for increased salaries for indigenous educators and healthcare professionals.

- **Environmental protection and combating illegal activities**

Environmental preservation and land regularization are intrinsically linked subjects. Territories inhabited by traditional peoples encompass a significant portion of standing forests and clean rivers, in greater harmony with nature. Therefore, actions for land and environmental regularization, including the creation, titling, demarcation, and consolidation of Indigenous Lands (TIs), Extractive Reserves (Resex), Quilombos, Settlements, Conservation Units, and similar areas are crucial for the environmental agenda. These measures ensure that the land fully serves its social function, especially in the state of Amazonas, which houses the majority of undesignated Brazilian public forests.

Recognizing these territories has the potential to enhance efforts against hunger and the violence faced by traditional peoples. This is especially true for the women defenders, due to the investment in sustainable economies and the reduction of conflicts with farmers, militias, miners, land grabbers, squatters, and criminal factions. Additionally, these lands need State protection even before competing legal possession processes. Public security institutions must prioritize and follow up on reports of violence in these territories, publicly acknowledging them, showing solidarity, and increasing the presence of the Federal Police, especially at national borders where drug trafficking is a reality.

- **Increase in investments and support for the protection, safety, and preservation of human rights defenders' lives**

The restructuring of the human rights defenders' protection program and the creation of a National Plan for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders are a key focus. This plan aims to guide policies in the area, placing special attention to environmentalists. The agenda also highlighted the inclusion of a gender perspective and an intersectional approach, essential for formulating normative frameworks and effective initiatives.

Regarding protection policies and networks, there was mention of the need to simplify and expand the reception processes, especially in the Northern Region. Within these programs, financial support to threatened defenders is also necessary, allowing, for example, the improvement of their home security with bars and cameras, as well as offering support houses for those who need to leave their homes.

- **State's follow-up on complaints**

Clearly, the formalization and investigation of complaints play an important role. Besides being a tool to reinforce these women's trust in the State, the systematic holding of aggressors accountable can impact the deterrence and prevention of rights violations against marginalized populations.

- **Improving care, support, and response to violence against women, young people, and children**

Ensuring public services, such as the DEAMs (Specialized Police Stations for Women), operating 24 hours, and programs like the "Projeto Paz Recuperando Jovens (Propaz)" – a comprehensive and interdisciplinary program for children and adolescents victims of sexual violence in the state of Pará³⁰ and their families – were highlighted as essential. Careful and empathetic service, considering the realities and specificities of these women, would be a distinguishing factor, say the defenders. They also emphasize the value of civil society associations centered on women of sexual violence, offering psychological support and actively combating this type of aggression.

- **Material and financial incentives for women's groups, associations, and organizations**

Women's associations and organizations are seen as crucial for Amazonian women to mobilize around common interests, adopting a gender perspective that recognizes their diversity. In some cases, these organizations also contribute to income generation, raise visibility, and stimulate leadership roles. Thus, the defenders suggest that the State supports these organizations.

Recommendations for civil society organizations, academia, collectives, and the defenders themselves:

- **Financial autonomy and alternative support networks**

The allocation of resources, both material and financial, from donations from both national and international civil society, is extremely relevant for underserved populations, ensuring their independence from potential manipulations or exchanges of resources for political favors. Additionally, one should consider the autonomy of communities in gathering evidence and documenting cases of violence for protection networks since many complaints do not receive the adequate follow-up.

- **Development of self-care and care methodologies based on local, community, and regional knowledge**

As a way to remain active in defending rights and preserving their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, women defenders highlight the need to strengthen self-care and self-esteem practices. In this context, the value of herbs and traditional baths of these peoples is emphasized. These ancestral practices, based on the knowledge of local medicines is highlighted. These ancestral practices, based on the knowledge of each community, that cultivate female empowerment and autonomy while strengthening the bond between women. Such practices are passed down between generations and serve as a source of income.

- **Provide spaces for traditional peoples to express their realities**

Traditional communities have found ways to share their realities from their own perspectives, engaging in social networks, public and academic spaces to revisit and redefine their perceived image. By occupying these new spaces for expression on their own merit, and with the support of partnerships with civil society, they can better disseminate, influence, and represent who the peoples of the Amazon are, where they live, their fights against the violence they endure, amplifying their voices both locally and nationally. This form of action has been essential to pressure the State to act on behalf of these populations, highlighting laws and programs that often exist "only on paper." Moreover, this activity has internally influenced communities, especially the youth and women, who begin to recognize their potentialities in new contexts.

The respect and strengthening of ancestral and traditional knowledge are significant issues, given the challenges faced in the region. Women defenders have been investing in the developing anti-racist policies that consider their particularities. Some defenders organize movements within religious communities to counteract political projects that reinforce religious intolerance while also contributing to the formulation of policies that ensure the rights of African matrix people and religions. The implementation of affirmative action policies in universities and the role of student movements have also played a part in amplifying their voices.

- **Development of academic productions**

It is essential to invest in research on topics that impact the region, as a way to produce evidence to inform public policies. This will make it possible to examine, for example, the relationship between pesticides and health, as well as reinforce the climate justice agenda (environmental racism) concerning the safety and protection of the defenders of rivers and forests.

“I have so many dreams, but for 2030 I dream of the land and environmental regularization in Brazil, with all territories created, titled, demarcated, and consolidated (Indigenous Lands, Extractive Reserves, Quilombos, Settlements, etc.), with the land fulfilling its social function, no more hunger for those who produce, and no more bloodshed of those who sustain life on this planet. Demarcation is fundamental, but ensuring the maintenance of these rights and the well-being of the peoples is the biggest dream, right?”

- Amazonian woman

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Endnotes

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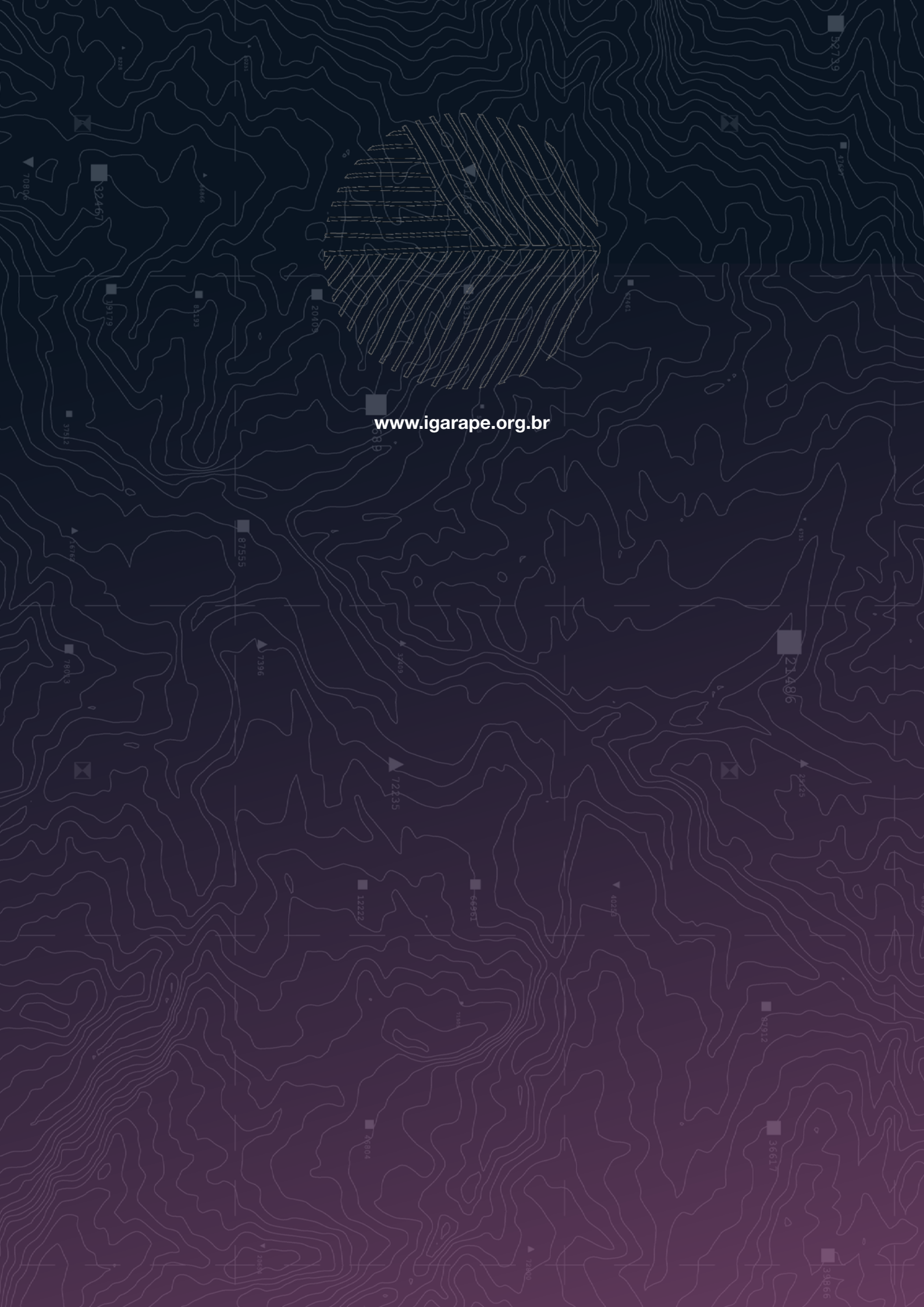
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