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MARIA DA SILVA MIGUEL

I am woman-mother and warrior,
the stove is no longer my limit.
I am called queen of the home,
but I am greater than ocean and sea.
I am mother, I give life,
I am a woman, pain.
I am a warrior, a bird—I sing!

—from “The People is Poet”

by Maria Miguel

I interviewed Maria da Silva Miguel inside her home at the eastern periphery of São Paulo. Maria lives in a small, one room concrete structure in a hillside favela.[†] A large wooden cross adorns the wall of her single room home. Her dresser is arranged like an altar, the Bible resting prominently at the center under a protective plastic cover.

[†]*Favelas*, usually described as “shantytowns,” are squatter villages where people originally build homes out of any scrap materials they can find. Many people try to gradually improve their homes, adding firm walls and concrete floors, hoping to eventually obtain a legal title to the land they occupy.

Maria Miguel sits with her two great-grandchildren on the steps outside of her house.

Maria Miguel is a great-grandmother to six young children, two of whom live with her. She started writing poetry when she was sixty-five, and now writes songs for her church and for political demonstrations. A national Brazilian religious magazine recently published one of her songs of struggle, "The People is Poet." Maria is active in the land movement, the health movement, the local Bible study group and is passionately involved in local women's groups.

Born of slaves, Maria is deeply concerned about the continuing oppression of blacks in Brazil. Roughly fifty percent of Brazil's population is black, most of them descendents of slaves. Brazil officially abolished slavery in 1888.

Periodically during the interview, Maria Miguel rocks with laughter—"I really like to write about women—because I'm a woman!" In her poetry she calls herself a "warrior." That she is, a warrior and a rock, and a reed for God's voice, giving voice to the people.

After the interview she offers Anne, my lay missionary friend, and me coffee, apologizing that she doesn't have any bread. I leave her simple home warmed by her welcome, humbled and inspired by her songs.



I was born in a little rural town in the state of Minas Gerais [central Brazil]. When I was fifteen, I moved from the countryside to the big city. I arrived in São Paulo on the third day of Carnival—and I thought they were giving me a big party!

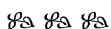
I went to work as a maid, and my first child was born in the house of the people I worked for, and my second child died.

That's when my suffering began.

My suffering continued throughout my life. I was so poor. I worked to make Brazil a great country, and I didn't achieve anything.

My only achievement is the life God has given me. For me, this is a marvelous thing! God has given me *life*—this is everything. Thanks be to God.

I praise God all the time!





Altar in room of Maria da Silva Miguel.



A favela in the Eastern Zone of São Paulo, much like the one surrounding Maria Miguel's home.

My mother lived near the time of slavery.

Although I think the times of slavery were awful, I think it's worse now. You see, where I was raised there was always at least a cup of milk on the table or a chicken in the yard.

My mother came to visit me in São Paulo and was so upset when she saw our lives. She said, "I already lived in slavery, but the slavery you are living here is much worse. Here in São Paulo you have to run away from men in the street. In my day if we saw a man in the street we ran to catch up with him so we that had company and protection."

She also said that at least in slavery, people managed to eat. Sometimes the owners would half-bury the slave and whip them. The person would die or live, but the master never stopped feeding someone. Today, we are not whipped or half-buried, but we have no food to eat!

Thank God that I haven't starved yet. But, I lived through much hunger as a child.

Things are worse today. They really are.

The poor people of Brazil are really at "zero." The poor lack everything—a house, food, work. It's no good to be healthy if you have to live under a bridge!

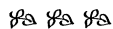
From the time a child is born, it has problems—poor nutrition, lack of education. Most mothers also work as domestic maids, leaving the house early to help meet the "cost of life" since the husband doesn't earn enough.

The problem in Brazil is terrible—everyone has to work.

There are days when my grandchild asks me for an orange, and I don't have one to give. In some houses a child will ask for bread, and there is none. What a way for a child to grow up!

And the rich collaborate with this suffering. Yes, the powerful people are responsible, the whole society is. We don't bring these problems on ourselves. A child is not *born* marginalized! They become marginalized *after* they are born by the daily hardships of their lives.

No one likes to live like this.



There's also plenty of racism in Brazil.

Black people aren't very well accepted for various work positions simply because of their skin color. It really bothers me that people speak against blacks so much.

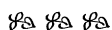
You know, if a white person is running down the street, they think he's jogging. But, if a black person is jogging, they think he's running away from the police or something, because black people are considered pickpockets and thieves. People always come down on black people.

White people rob at will, but no one says anything because they're afraid of the whites! And the white people are the ones who are really afraid of us—because if the people were united, we would do away with this kind of injustice. So long as we're not united, we'll never have liberation.

My hope for the future is liberation.

Liberation—that we have houses for our children and grandchildren. I don't know if I'll reach this dream of a house and a just salary, of dignity and justice for the poor. I may not reach it, but I have grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

I have hope for the young.



Since I was little, I was raised in the Church.

But the church was, well, a bit closed then. The Bible was only for the priest and the Mass was in Latin. Thank God it all changed!

I abandoned the church for a time. But as the saying goes, "Those who don't return from love, return from pain." I returned from pain . . . from pain. I felt very sick, totally diminished, absolutely useless. Then I said to myself, "I know I've neglected the church. I need to search out the way of God."

So, about ten years ago I met Sister Josefa, who opened the way.

I went to Mass and she started to talk to me about the struggle. I tried to help her out, so I became involved with the movement to start a day-care center. Before too long I was in the land movement, the health movement and the Bible study group!

Now I work a lot with the women's movement in our region. I work in all of the movements, but, really, the struggle is the struggle of women. Thank God that we have women who are aware.

In my poem, "The People is Poet," *woman warrior* refers to the struggle.

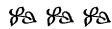
I am a woman warrior—I'm going to the struggle! I'm going to the struggle to get our rights! It's not a struggle with guns. Our weapon is our word. We have the right to speak!

The struggle is when I leave my house to go after what I need. If we don't struggle, we won't get anything—we'll remain prisoners, crushed under the heel of the powerful people. No one will come knocking on our door to give us housing, health care, education, food. Not the mayor, not the government. We have to demand our rights. We have to cry out—this is the struggle!

And if we don't have faith, we won't succeed.

Our Bible group tries to wake people up to their oppression.

Some people aren't involved in the church or the struggle because they don't have much faith. Without faith, they're terribly discouraged by their oppression. We all have to remember God and do what we can.



I didn't start writing poetry until I was sixty-five. One day I just felt like writing poetry! I really like to write about women—because I'm a woman! Oh how I love to write poetry!

The priest asks me, "Dona Maria, do you have a message to-day?" It can be Fathers' Day or Mothers' Day or any day. I have poetry for every day!

Poetry is part of the struggle!

Poetry is good for us, good for our *spirit* and our *body* also, because happiness always strengthens our lives. My many, many sorrows and problems go away.

We, the people, speak through our music.

When we march in the streets, people who can hardly read or write understand what we're saying in the songs! We aren't looking for trouble when we march, but we're willing to risk prison if that's what it comes down to.

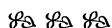
The music and words are a *release*. They let us breathe freely and give vent to our struggles. It's our way to name reality, to expose reality.

You see, when we struggle, we must have an open spirit.

If you are only burdened by problems and sorrows, you'll be closed. You won't be able to join in the struggle. We have to get beyond this weariness, these sorrows.



Some days I, too, feel so weighed down by my daily life struggles. But, thank God I have enough energy to get beyond this!



I never lack for much, nor do my neighbors or friends. We only have to ask God. We are nourished by the strength of God and the Holy Spirit walks with us.

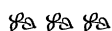
Our faith is in God. Without God we can't journey onward.

I pray very much for my companions in the struggle. I have my Bible there by my bed. I read it every night. I pray before I eat my food, and ask God to bless the nourishment that I'm going to eat.

My prayers are like sermons! If I don't pray for everyone, I can't sleep. Sometimes I lie down so tired, saying, "today I can't pray." But I get up and pray!

My faith is great, thanks be to God.

The grace of God sustains me.



Besides the acts of violence against women that you witness, how else would you describe the situation of women in your neighborhood?

Women here are very discriminated against. In everything. With machismo, it seems that men are always ahead of women, more valued. A woman works and produces the same as a man. In addition to working at the factory, she works at home. She's discriminated against by her boss and by her husband.

My neighbor was attacked in back of her own house. Poor thing, she works at night in a restaurant. It was the bus driver, who knew she came home at that time, hiding and waiting for her. Finally the husband heard her screams.

We're disgusted with this kind of thing—we can't go out in the streets anymore! I get, well, not despairing, because I have much faith in God. But the way things are, there's just too much violence.

Maria, sitting at her kitchen table, reads from her poetry notebook.

We're struggling for the liberation of women. Someday we will arrive!

Do you think the wealthy also need liberation?

Some people have so much money that they don't know what to spend it on! Money causes so much violence, such as people kidnapping for money.

The rich can only gain from the liberation of the poor. We want the right of equality and dignity for *everyone*. You see, I don't want rich people's money! No! I'm not going to rob anyone! We want—well, as I write in a song, *We want them to stoop down and give us the crumbs from their tables*. Only this!

As it is, if the poor want to eat a piece of bread, they have to ask the rich. We want the rich to have compassion on the poor. We want at least their crumbs—but we want much more than this! We are the people of God, and we're not being treated like the people of God. God doesn't want this! Jesus wants us to practice faith and love and unity. *This* is what God wants for the people of God.

There are many people around the world who would like to be more committed. What can we do to be on the side of the poor?

I always ask God to open the hearts of these people—the middle-class and even the rich. They seem to have closed hearts. But, their hearts are of flesh just like ours! I'd like them to think a bit more about the poor. God always said, "Love one another as I've loved you." And God loves all of us.

God isn't responsible for the suffering here. People are responsible—the powerful, the rich people who want to be richer. They forget about the poor, who are becoming more and more poor.

So, I ask God to open their hearts. I ask God to make the powerful have *compassion* on the poor who work so hard for them, give them a just salary so the poor can live in dignity.

What can we do to be more in solidarity with your people?

People there should get to know the day-to-day lives of people here. This would give us more strength! I'd like people to know our suffering, so they could help us.

People here are very skeptical, they're losing all faith. You see, our President [Collar de Mello] said he would do away with poverty, but he really means he will do away with the poor! He isn't changing the unjust financial situation, he is killing the poor through hunger and homelessness.

We need people to raise awareness so we can get out of this abyss. We suffer so much, there are no words to express it! People are begging in the streets! We know there are countries that are better organized. I don't want wealth, but I don't want anyone to be poor. Please, help us do away with our misery.

We have hope that one day things will really change. If I don't see it, maybe my grandchildren will, or even my great-grandchildren.

