



Finding Social and Environmental Justice in the Fashion Production Chain in Brazil: When Fashion is Created with Nature by Women in Their Communities

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Abstract

Brazil covers a large territory, and although only 15% of its population is distributed in rural areas (IBGE Educa 2015), rural dwellers take on the chief responsibility for conserving local biodiversity. This article uses empirical research with a qualitative approach to present four cases of consolidated communities working with Amazonian rubber, regenerative cotton, weaving and lacework. It shows how rural communities pursue solutions for sustainable livelihoods in their own place of origin through the production of raw materials and products for the fashion chain, ensuring food security, income generation, maintenance of local biomes and gender justice. Particularly, this study examines the role of women beyond their families in ensuring work equity and better income distribution. Design appears as a positive agent, transforming ancestral and artisanal culture and knowledge into product innovation with added value to ensure production viability as well as enhancing community wellbeing.

Keywords

Sustainable fashion; craft; design; productive communities; socio-environmental equity; collaborative work systems.

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Introduction

The Brazilian garment and textile industry is almost 200 years old, and Brazil is the largest Western textile chain, which places Brazil as one of the major players in the global fashion system (Abit 2022). The global fashion production chain encompasses the extraction of raw materials, spinning, weaving, processing, dyeing, manufacturing, retail and disposal. This path has its origins in the extraction of natural or synthetic fibres from petroleum. Every step of this chain is rife with injustice and is highly criticised for its excesses, human rights abuses and environmental depletion. Globally, the garment sector is the second-worst for people most at risk of modern slavery (Walk Free 2018). According to a report developed by McKinsey & Company and the Global Fashion Agenda, in 2018, the global fashion industry produced approximately 2.1 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, corresponding to 4% of the global total, which is equivalent to the annual greenhouse gas emissions of France, Germany and the United Kingdom combined. The highest concentration of carbon dioxide in the fashion industry occurs at the raw material production level (McKinsey & Company and Global Fashion Agenda 2020). These challenges of fashion production come into direct conflict with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Sustainable Development n.d.). We observe that, fundamentally, the pursuit of infinite wealth and maximum profitability conflicts with a finite planet, which is manifested not only by the climate crisis but also by cultural, political, economic and social crises, with societies plagued by inequality and exclusion.

In the meantime, the world has faced—still faces and will remain facing—the tremendous effects and tragic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Brazil, workers were severely affected by the pandemic, and approximately 15% of the population was unemployed between January and March 2021, representing a historic record (Agência IBGE Notícias 2021). A survey conducted in 2020 with immigrant garment workers in São Paulo showed that 61% of 146 workers interviewed reported difficulties in buying food because of the pandemic (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre 2020). Further, the pandemic affected people in rural areas harshly, where ‘severe food insecurity is twice as high in households without access to water for food and livestock production compared to those with access to water’ (Penssan 2021: 7). As we can see all over the world, crises like the pandemic accelerate and deepen the social, economic and environmental inequalities and injustices, especially with respect to vulnerable groups.

Given these challenges, it is important to review the alternative socio-economic matrices that are capable of strengthening the capacity for local, sustainable development in the face of the exploitative mainstream fashion system. There are productive groups that work outside the industrial system and present themselves as distributed and decentralised models of local production, and it is their vision we look to. This article studies the production of fashion goods in Brazil through artisanal work that values manual processes, traditional knowledge, people, cultures and nature, and dialogues with design to reach regulated manufacturing with respect for human rights and the environment. The article focuses on identifying the role and space occupied by women in their organisations (the selected case studies) from the perspective of institutionalised practices aimed at generating social and environmental justice. We argue that these communities and their leaders act as political agents through promoting training actions and local, sustainable development in places where public policies often do not reach. Through the lens of solidarity regarding the economy and localism and aligned with the UN SDGs, we investigate how fair labour and income distribution processes are developed in harmony with the local environment.

Method

In this article, we take a case study approach to analyse the processes and structures of rural and coastal groups contributing to the fashion supply chain in Brazil. There are several communities and associations across Brazil seeking economic solutions for a decent livelihood from their own place of origin (i.e., rural communities far from the resources of large urban centres and in the most diverse types of territories and cultures). Through our research, we noticed that the knowledge of traditional populations translates into a way of conserving nature since these populations have been accumulating life learning, generation to generation, about natural cycles, local fauna, the influence of the moon and the seasons on their activities,

and the smart management systems of natural resources so they can integrate their territories in harmony and sustainably. For the four case studies selected (see Table 1), fair production and the trade of raw materials and products (which also ensure food security), the maintenance of local biomes and gender justice are important means of income.

Table 1. Case studies

Case study	Description	Web addresses
Redeiras	An association with a brand formed by female artisans who work with scales, fish leather and fishing nets to create bags and accessories based in the São Pedro fishing colony in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in the South Region of Brazil.	https://redeiras.com.br/ https://www.instagram.com/redeiras/
<i>Casa das Rendeiras de Saubara</i>	An association of female artisans who safeguard the memories and material heritage of bobbin lace in the municipality of Saubara in the state of Bahia, in the Northeast Region of Brazil.	https://casadasrendeirasdesaubara.com.br/ The fashion shows with the lacemakers' work: https://marciaganem.com/desfiles/
<i>Justa Trama</i>	An organisation based on the cultivation, processing and commercialisation of agroecological cotton garments that operates and is distributed across five Brazilian states: Ceará, Mato Grosso do Sul, Rondônia, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul.	https://justatrama.com.br/
Seringô	An institution and brand that works with social and environmental initiatives that combine community development, innovation and culture based on the extraction, processing and use of Amazonian natural rubber for crafts and shoes, based in the states of Pará, Acre, Amazonas, Rondônia and Tocantins in North Region of Brazil.	https://seringo.eco.br/ https://www.instagram.com/seringooficial/

The case studies were established through qualitative research with an ethnographic approach to data collection. Data were collected from direct interactions through several conversations and non-structured interviews with the directors, coordinators, leaders and artisans of these communities. We, the authors, have personally followed the work that these groups have been developing for many years. The narratives of their own experiences were the main sources of research. We have also based our analysis on scientific publications by researchers who observed these communities in loco, interviews with other researchers and designers, and information published by official entities to ensure the reliability of the information, such as Artesol, an independent Brazilian non-profit civil society organisation that supports artisans throughout the country and works as a centre for research, reflection and training for public policies (Artesol n.d.). In our analysis, we examined the relationships established between communities and their territories, the role women play in their communities, production processes, local techniques and culture, distribution of work and income in the productive groups, and how they dialogue with design to create fashion products with social and environmental added value.

The Four Cases: Territory Design, Dialogic Design, Design for Fair Production, and Design with Nature Mimesis

Redeiras

'Redeiras' means women who work with fishing nets (*redes*). In the extreme South Region of Brazil, there is a peninsula of land between the largest lagoon in South America (Lagoa dos Patos) and the Atlantic Ocean, where around 5,000 people live in the São Pedro fishing colony (Redeiras n.d.) surrounded by beautiful nature and 25 kilometres of an unpaved road away from the nearest town, Pelotas, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The white ethnic community of European origin descends from Portuguese and Spanish colonisers and from Italian, German and French immigrants.

Thirteen years ago, a group of women formed an association to give a new purpose to the old fishing nets abandoned by their husbands on the beach. Since then, they have been receiving support from the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (SEBRAE), along with administrative and commercial assistance and design consultancy. Given the size of Brazil, it has many communities with their own characteristics and culture; SEBRAE works by supporting diverse community initiatives and assisting them to become structured businesses that can ensure the communities' social and economic survival.

Small businesses have the potential to become protagonists of sustainable development in Brazil. By generating income from entrepreneurship and participating in new economies, they can transform not only their businesses but also the very territories in which they are located. In this sense, the generation of value for micro and small companies can come from their ability to develop their management based on knowledge and experience combined with innovation. This entrepreneurial culture, aligned with the encouragement of sustainability in companies, helps to create favourable environments for the healthy development of small businesses (Sebrae n.d.).

Today, the group has nine associates, most of whom are retired and coordinate the creation, production and marketing independently. They distribute work to 20 families involved in collecting the fishing nets abandoned on the beach. From these fishing nets, the women artisans recover, clean, dye, spin, weave in the loom and crochet or knit to create fashion accessories (e.g., bags and necklaces). SEBRAE has a program for hiring designers specialised in designs for handicrafts, respecting the culture and anthropological concepts. On this path today, 'territory design' is the design approach and methodology that aims to boost the territory's resources and enhance its intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the designer is to recognise and make recognisable local values and qualities. It was configured as a methodology of positive and careful design interference for communities.

In this community, the territory design approach was applied from the understanding that the main value lies in people and from how a group of determined women from a rural settlement can improve their living conditions. The consultant designer, Karine Faccin, carried out an immersion process to understand the social, cultural and environmental issues and existing raw materials. Therefore, she proposed a plan, articulating the possibilities of production, combining ancestral knowledge with a viable praxis dimensioned to that reality and economic success. A productive system was implemented with workers as the protagonists of the process of change.

Their work is recognised as having market value because of its particular visual and tactile characteristics, in addition to the great appeal and message of sustainability, guaranteeing consumers' interest. They sell their products in the national market in shops, craft and design fairs and exhibitions, as well as on their ecommerce sites and a small export channel.

Although it is a small business, Redeiras has aided the community to escape poverty by guaranteeing financial autonomy to the female artisans who have a greater income than their shrimp-fishing husbands, without putting aside their tasks as mothers, wives and grandparents. The emotional ties created between these women and their environment form the substrate on which the Redeiras give meaning to their place

of life and from which they create representations of wellbeing and good quality of life, even without luxuries or high technology. According to Rosani Raffi Schiller, treasurer and artisan at Redeiras: ‘we put our village on the map’ and ‘we are happy to offer an original, well-designed and sustainable product’¹. Finally, we could see that these women show great sensitivity to environmental issues, and through their activism, they are capable of encouraging care for nature and ecological principles within the community. They provide good examples of education for their descendants, ensuring a good life for their families, preserving the environment and valuing decent work for women.

Casa das Rendeiras de Saubara

The village of Saubara was founded in 1550 by the seashore in the Todos os Santos Bay (All Saints’ Bay), Bahia. Today, the population of mostly Black ethnicity (descendants of Indigenous peoples, Portuguese and Africans) is approximately 12,400 inhabitants. The region presents a diverse landscape composed of beaches, cliffs, mangrove areas and Atlantic Forest with rivers and waterfalls. The name ‘Saubara’ has an Indigenous origin, from the Tupi-Guarani word ‘*saúva*’, which is a type of ant that exists there.

According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE 2019), Saubara is a very poor municipality, where people with formal employment and assured labour rights comprise only 10% of the population, with an average salary of 1.4 times the minimum wage (approximately USD200), and half the population lives on just half the minimum wage. However, they can also count on nature to maintain their livelihoods and ensure food, including seafood, cassava, coconut and palm oil.

Currently, the Saubara Artisans Association has 53 associated women lacemakers. The *Casa das Rendeiras de Saubara* (House of the Lacemakers from Saubara) is a space to safeguard the heritage and prominence of Black women through their practice with straw and bobbin lace. Widespread in Europe, the bobbin technique would have arrived in Brazil through Portugal and would have been made by both women from rich families and by enslaved people. Bobbin lace was installed along the Brazilian coast and adapted to the materials available in the region, being incorporated as a daily activity for women linked to the sea. People in Brazil say that ‘where there are fishing nets, there are laces’, and the hands of these women who make their living from the mangroves and the sea are the same ones that weave fine cotton threads in a skilful dance between their fingers and the bobbins.

Shellfishing is an activity that is primarily carried out by women. Shellfish gatherers play an important cultural and economic role in Saubara because their activity involves working relationships and resistance, perpetuating memories passed down through generations and marking aspects of their fight for survival. The gender division in fishing work is clearly defined because historically, the mangroves are an area reserved for women, while the high sea is a place for men. However, women are involved in the entire fishing production chain, the manufacture and repair of nets, preparation of baits, preparation and conservation of fish, and distribution and sale.

In this context, bobbin lace involves culture, territory and people, as well as identifying chains of products and services beyond crafts that are capable of having positive effects on the community, such as fashion, gastronomy and tourism. In fashion, the contribution of design comes from recognising these artisanal traditions and welcoming the group of women to collaboratively develop new materials, products and creative solutions with added value that contribute to positive transformations in the community. In addition to traditional lace products, such as table rails, tablecloths and layettes, which are sold at the association’s headquarters in Saubara, the lacemakers also work with Márcia Ganem, a fashion designer, to weave lace dresses for brides, artists and movie costumes.

Ganem is a collaborator and develops a sense of sustainability with the community. Based on research, she has managed to regenerate polyamide fibre from car tyres and seat belts and has incorporated its high firmness yet malleable characteristics in the production of bobbin lace. The innovation has also involved a new design developed together with the artisans called *Flor da Maré* (Tide Flower) in reference to the

alternate rise and fall of the ocean surface caused by the attraction of the moon and sun. This movement of water has a strong effect on these people's lives.

The innovative result from the combination of recycling, design and traditional technique incorporates important cultural and environmental values. The innovation in the lace typology joins fashion design and the unconventional material to guarantee success in the spaces where high fashion is shown in Brazil, Argentina, Spain, England and Japan. According to Ganem (2016), this transforms the view of scarcity into a wide-angle view of possibilities that are constituted from the meeting between them.

The achievement from the combination of methods applied to the development of productive systems, which also include women as protagonists, converses with dialogic design, where everyday life is the main input and fundamental to a creative and innovative process. In this scenario, the dialogic design contributes to systematising the artisans' empirical knowledge in an innovative way. Thus, the artisans are part of the process and assimilate the innovation rather well through the collective collaboration format.

Further, the individual and collective memory of Black women is an important legacy for the local cultural heritage. The image of women is strongly represented and expressed by female deities, an African cultural heritage that has been maintained, presenting the nature of female orixás in the process of valuing women. The wisdom passed on by generations, largely through orality, evokes memories that are responsible for the sense of belonging, which creates the necessary conditions to raise awareness, education and action about the environment that supports the process of conserving the ecosystem. The lacemaking craft turns the bobbin lacemakers into guardians of cultural heritage through immaterial memory, representing all other lace communities that inhabit the Brazilian coast (12,000 kilometres) who share similar realities that always relate to gender and race issues with the need for resistance and survival, crafts and work.

Justa Trama

The central cooperative *Justa Trama* (Fair Weft) is a complete agroecological cotton production chain in Brazil, from farming, going through the stages of spinning, weaving, crafting and manufacturing, to the administration and trade of agroecological cotton fabrics and garments. *Justa Trama* has been operating for nearly 20 years, and it has been structured in the social, environmental and economic sectors. Its success is based on the principles of solidarity economy and fair trade practices, linking farmers, yarn makers, weavers, artisans and garment workers from five Brazilian states: Rio Grande do Sul, Mato Grosso do Sul, Minas Gerais, Ceará and Rondônia (*Justa Trama* n.d.).

Today, the network comprises approximately 600 people, mostly women, working collectively through cooperatives, associations and groups of self-managed workers based on family farming with environmentally sustainable agriculture practices acquired through the transfer of knowledge and technologies from Esplar, a non-government, non-profit organisation in Ceará. *Justa Trama* also involves cotton farmers from Mato Grosso do Sul, seed collectors from Rondônia for buttons or bio jewels, spinners and weavers from Minas Gerais and garment workers from Rio Grande do Sul.

Justa Trama arose from the desire to accommodate a large contingent of excluded producers, including families in rural areas and unemployed workers, due to the bankruptcy of textile industries in large centres. The decision to manufacture garments on their own, for their own brand and not for other brands also comes from the need to solve the problem between those who produce and earn little and those who buy and pay a lot. According to Nelsa Nespolo, President Director at *Justa Trama*, 'the prices of the products are low, as they have to be accessible so that those who produce them have the financial conditions to buy them'².

At *Justa Trama*, the protagonists of this network democratically articulate their projects with a focus on generating work and income for the people involved, ensuring gender and social equity, and environmental conservation. Thus, they have managed to process this change, incorporating premises of

cooperativism, solidarity economy, sustainable development and fair trade into a new business model, not only in relation to the mode of production and valorisation of work but also for their quality of life and concern with the environment. In an interview for the Fashion Revolution's Fashion Transparency Index Brazil report, Nespolo stated that the key element to building a different society is sustainable development that truly includes people and improves their lives while also caring for the environment and respecting end consumers. She highlighted that it is necessary to give special attention 'to fair income distribution and to the environment as well as resisting the unequal society and the concentration of income in which we currently live' and concluded that 'it is possible to produce, agree to pay fair prices and share the value generated equally among all the parts involved' (Fashion Revolution 2021: 23). *Justa Trama* represents a collective achievement with recognition and support by national and international entities including UN Women, the Bank of Brazil Social Technology (*Tecnologia Social Banco do Brasil*), Bank of Brazil Foundation (*Fundação Banco do Brasil*), Cooperatives and Solidarity Enterprises Centre (Unisol Brasil) (*Central de Cooperativas e Empreendimentos Solidários*), Lojas Renner Institute, Petrobras and others.

Justa Trama's cotton has an organic certification based on the Participatory Guarantee Systems, regulated by Brazilian legislation to guarantee the organic quality of products. The Participatory Guarantee Systems enable a credibility generation process established by the direct participation of its members in collective actions to assess the suppliers' compliance with the technical regulations of organic production (*Ministério da Agricultura, Pecuária e Abastecimento* 2008). It also has the Fairtrade International certification that helps producers develop their fair trade production. Further, all *Justa Trama* projects are affiliated with Unisol Brasil,³ a civil association with a commitment to the interests of the working class, the improvement of people's living and working conditions, economic efficiency and engagement in the process of the transformation of Brazilian society based on the values of democracy and social justice. Finally, *Justa Trama* shows that it is possible to have a viable agroecological product across the Brazilian territory that constitutes, for each link, fair production values and processes with no exploration and no intermediaries.

Seringó

Rubber tappers are an 'invisible' population in society who live far from urban centres amid the vegetation of the Amazon rainforest. Basic services such as health, education, communication and public policies barely reach them, the true guardians of the forest against invasions and deforestation.

The Hub for the Protection of Biodiversity and Sustainable Use of Natural Resources – Poloprobio and the Amazon Eco-Extractivists Production Cooperative - Coopereco are two agro-extractivist institutions that have been working together for almost 30 years in areas of the states of Pará, Amazonas, Acre, Tocantins and Rondônia in northern Brazil, in the Amazon region. Its mission is to promote the improvement of the quality of life of Indigenous populations and extractive communities aimed at sustainable regional development and environmental protection.⁴

Poloprobio is a non-government organisation, a private non-profit association that develops certified social technologies to work with communities, building management plans for the certification of organic products. Its mission is to bring together, select and qualify, through professional training courses, both men to extract latex and produce rubber with sustainable practices and women to transform latex into handcrafted products with market value.

Coopereco is a cooperative of Indigenous peoples, rubber tappers, riverside dwellers and quilombolas⁵ that manages the economic part of this initiative, collecting rubber from the various communities involved and helping to develop a production chain for the rubber, which is not a commodity but a product from family farming. The association of these entities considers the cultural aspects of each ethnicity, which includes acting with respect for the way of life and the time of action and response of each community. This helps preserve the aspects that are peculiar to each community and only share what is allowed by the culture of each people, ethnicity or population.

Seringô is a project that has been developed by Coopereco and Poloprobio in partnership with extractivist people and their base organisations. It is a collective construction of a sustainable business with a certified social technology that involves the 'encauchados' and the technical, scientific knowledge of 'vulcanisation'. This production strategy allows for the management and reactivation of native Amazonian rubber cultivation and allows people to live in harmony with nature, as they have always lived. *Encauchados* are rubber products made from a mixture of latex with vegetable fibres, such as residues from the acai processing industry.

The social technology from the sustainable management of rubber that transformed the industrial process of vulcanisation into an artisanal process is based on the latex handling process developed to free the local community from the need for the industrial process. In this case, the latex-based compound that would be processed in the industry is naturally dehydrated and transformed into vegetable rubber on-site using handcrafted moulds without the need for electricity, machines or greenhouses, that is, with the rational use of natural resources.

Seringô was granted a Social Technology Certificate by the Bank of Brazil Foundation; has certification that the latex is organic; is Fair Trade IBD Certified, which guarantees that the products respect the principles of fair trade, from latex collection to production processes and reaching the final consumer; and family farming product certification by the Ministry of Agriculture, Brazil. Additionally, the organisation has the recognition and support of many entities and has won a large number of awards in recent years.

These organisations represent a large contingent of approximately 5,000 people, who are organised and maintained by democratic and transparent practices under the protection of the current laws in Brazil. They ensure that human and environmental values are preserved and cultivate a beneficial relationship between the parties based on respect, commitment and trust. To prevent the forest populations from migrating to other regions or participating in predatory activities, the organisations created agroecological products, social methodologies and simplified techniques capable of being carried out locally on a small scale and with the need for few resources, such as decoration and fashion products.

Most of them have never left their communities, and when they go to Belém, the capital of Pará, for the first time to participate in the assemblies and other collective actions of the cooperative, they develop a sense of belonging, empowerment and entrepreneurship. Some of them also start to work as multipliers by gathering new participants and transmitting knowledge, which improves the results of the activities and fieldwork. The work format is established in a family production unit, where men extract and prepare latex and women make the handicrafts.

The family production unit has provided women with their own income through handicrafts made at home, allowing them to continue their household activities. While their husbands organise the production of latex, the women work from home in addition to carrying out other activities, from harvesting acai, fishing and hunting and farming bananas and cassava to producing flour. Thus, the families seem to be closer together. Rubber tappers own their own businesses as entrepreneurs associated with the cooperative and share the financial results. This means that they no longer need to engage in predatory activities (such as selling wood) to guarantee their income and live better and in harmony with nature, keeping the forest, from where they earn their living, standing.

More recently, young people have been included in the process because many of them need to go to cities in search of study and work. However, often, the opportunities they find do not guarantee them a good quality of life. Therefore, Seringô created a bio jewellery programme to attract teenage girls (and boys) and allow them to stay in their communities. Currently, there are 60 young women, daughters of artisans, who are part of the programme. Marizeli Freitas Mendes, a multiplier and artisan, believes that the local future is keeping nature alive and that 'this is the good thing about the project: planting the seed of change so that in the future families will have income and young people will be at home, without having to leave due to the lack of work' (EcoUni 2021).

This work arises from the sensitivity, dedication and leadership of a couple: Maria Zélia Damasceno and Francisco Samonek. Damasceno is the president of Coopereco, the pedagogy coordinator of the courses and accompanies the eco-extractive family farmers who participate in the project as local multipliers. She is responsible for the development and replication of their social technologies and works in the creation and development of handcrafted latex products by coordinating the work with women. Samonek is an environmentalist and the president of Poloprobio, specialising in the management of socio-environmental projects and non-timber forest resources, with an emphasis on the natural rubber production chain working on the following topics: socio-productive inclusion in the Amazon, sustainable organic extractivism, native rubber, entrepreneurship and technological innovation and social technologies.

Products and processes have gone through several steps of development since the 1990s to reach the current stage, resulting in endless possibilities for new product lines. The brand's name, 'Seringô', was created in 2014 to better position Amazonian rubber products in the market and produces a diverse line of bold design products that include sandals, bio jewels and table sets that are inspired by the shapes, textures and colours of the Amazon rainforest leaves such as the water lily, *capeba* and *apuí*. The cooperative hires designers who work with communities to design crafts and fashion design projects with a nature mimesis approach. Therefore, they observe the vegetables around them and make moulds of the large leaves, which become plate coasters, vases, cup holders and table rails. The impressions taken directly from the surfaces of the leaves are also applied to the tactile textures of the natural rubber sandal insoles. Further analysis of the work of Seringô may be found in Samonek (2022).

Currently, they are expanding beyond handicrafts and advancing into sustainable fashion design. The designers who accompany Seringô (through mimesis of nature) are Lídia Abraham Pereira from the state of Pará, Mariah Rovery from São Paulo, and mentor Fred Gelli from Rio de Janeiro. The main product is footwear, wherein soles, insoles and foams comprise 30% of residual fibres from acai. In addition to being an important food, the acai kernel, which was previously discarded as waste by the food industry, is now used as a dye and chemical filler in the components of soles. Thus, the brand works towards sustainable development in the Amazon region, maintaining the rubber tappers' communities' own identity, the financial independence of each family, the improvement of the quality of life and the preservation of nature.

Reflections on the Four Cases

Traditional peoples and communities: culturally differentiated groups that recognise themselves as such, that have their own forms of social organisation, that occupy and use territories and natural resources as a condition for their cultural, social, religious, ancestral and economic reproduction, using knowledge, innovations and practices generated and transmitted by tradition. (*Secretaria Especial do Desenvolvimento Social* n.d.)

This article has discussed four fashion-centred case studies in Brazil that demonstrate how when fashion is integrated into community-led and women-centred projects, design-led approaches to fashion production can contribute to social and environmental justice. Although varied, each case demonstrates ways in which individuals or groups of people are able to provide effective solutions to promote changes for better living conditions for the inhabitants of rural settlements and how this can be in harmony with the local environment and with the community.

The study paid special attention to the role of women in working for gender equity and financial autonomy and their involvement in decision-making processes. We observed that women themselves are often the ones who gain the strength and courage to lead large organisations, such as Nespolo, who has been the President Director of the *Justa Trama* cooperative for nearly 20 years. She has coordinated more than 600 workers in the agroecological cotton chain across five Brazilian states. Women at Redeiras did not accept their status as residents of a forgotten village in the extreme south of Brazil and created a sustainable fashion accessories business that solves both the environmental impact caused by the incorrect disposal

of fishing nets as well as their own financial autonomy, giving them a physical and virtual presence in various craft and design projects, fairs and shops in the country and around the world.

The *Casa das Rendeiras de Saubara* are mothers with all the responsibilities of 'housewives' but are also in charge of supporting the family through artisanal seafood fishing. Every day, after fulfilling the working conditions imposed by the local society, they find the courage, joy and pleasure to meet their friends at the headquarters of the lacemakers association to develop delicate bobbin and straw work together. The positive financial and emotional returns from a life of poverty and sacrifices come when they receive orders for high fashion dresses (e.g., for brides and parties) or costumes for artistic, cultural shows, whose images published in the media generate 'likes', recognition and admiration, thereby increasing their self-esteem.

In the far north of Brazil, in the Amazon region, Zélia is dedicated to working with women and girls through the craft of natural rubber products. They say that, initially, the husbands did not like it because the job used to occupy their wives' with working hours, which excited the women too much, and because some of these women started earning almost more money than their husbands, so the men became jealous. However, because all issues are brought up for conversation in collective assemblies, the problem has been solved. It was agreed that the women would no longer need to leave home to work so they could work on their land after carrying out household chores. From time to time, they meet at the headquarters of the cooperative as well.

In these contexts, design is a relevant aspect of transforming precarious life conditions into a dignified life. Design practices play two important roles: first, in determining the production methods and systems; and second, by bringing higher aesthetic value to the artefacts, which, in turn, provides greater market value. The design practices enable a quality leap in the artefacts' aesthetics and presentation, which brings added market value. These regions that normally cultivate or extract raw materials for large industries to sell agricultural commodities at low prices have managed (especially in the case of Seringô and *Justa Trama*) to retain all design processes in their own hands. They produce, process and manufacture fashion products, ecological cotton fabrics, bio jewels, accessories and footwear themselves. Therefore, their financial gain is enhanced. It is interesting to note the different approaches to design methodologies for crafts and fashion that have been adopted: territory design, in the case of Rendeiras; dialogic design, in the case of *Casa das Rendeiras de Saubara*; and design with nature mimesis, in the case of Seringô. The original results can be observed on these projects' social media pages.

It is noteworthy that the leaders of the cases presented, rather than intentionally working towards the SDGs (UN n.d.), are seeking to achieve them. In general, they are doing their part to push bottom-up movements to contribute to the country's progress into sustainable development. Here, we highlight some of the SDGs that are more connected to these communities' initiatives. For example, SDG 1 is to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, and target 1.4 seeks to ensure that men and women, in particular people with low incomes and vulnerable people, have equal rights to economic resources, access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, natural resources and appropriate new technology (UN n.d.).

We identified that some of the groups are more consolidated than others, but it is interesting to analyse each process and unique way of solving local socio-economic and environmental problems by creating their own micropolitics, especially where public policies do not reach. In this context, we observed how these groups—and more closely, the role women play in them—can contribute to being effective in lifting people out of extreme poverty.

SDG 2, which aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture (UN n.d.) relates to how the women of the studied social groups work primarily to end their families' hunger through fishing and farming. Once this goal is reached, other activities are pursued with the aim of personal fulfilment and the increase of the family's income. Regarding SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all quality

education (UN n.d.), we observed how much these women value access to education. At *Casa das Rendeiras de Saubara*, they are aware that education can change their lives, and mothers do not allow their children to miss school. At Seringô, in addition to their leaders being postgraduates, they have already managed to have Indigenous people with masters degrees who are proud of this achievement.

Target 5.5 in SDG 5 aims to 'ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life' (UN n.d.) and dialogues with the constructed social roles assigned to men and women. We observed that women add domestic and professional activities. Conversely, we have several examples of female protagonism, even in the leadership of organisations. They are strong women who fight for equal opportunities in life, often even outperforming men.

SDG 13 provides guidelines for combating climate change (UN n.d.), which means that communities based on regenerative agriculture can make a great contribution to the balance of nature, working with sustainable farming technologies. Conserving biodiversity is crucial to combating climate change and ensuring that food systems, natural resources and healthy and decent livelihoods are sustained.

Conclusion

We conclude that each studied group is constituted by its own sociocultural and political identity. They build their own forms of survival and productive relationships based on ethnic origins and use knowledge and techniques learnt in life to meet their needs. The organisational standards of production and management of natural resources, the efforts to guarantee access to social goods and services and professional activities are all performed according to their needs and the available natural resources. The four approaches to design that we identified offer pathways for fashion practices that put community wellbeing first and contribute to the SDGs. The leadership of women has contributed to the success of the projects and improved the lives of the women working within them and those in the wider community. The cases demonstrate the creativity, ingenuity and sustainable possibilities of women-led and/or Indigenous community-developed initiatives.

Through examining these case studies, we sought to provide an overview of the production processes and organisational models found from conversations and interviews with directors, coordinators, leaders and participants of the analysed productive groups and from the analysis of other researchers working with these groups. Despite having established trusting relationships with our contacts and having sought quality and comprehensive information published by official entities that could describe the reality of these communities in the most reliable way possible, we, as researchers, cannot assume the position of auditing or ensure that there are no problems or failures in the ecosystems studied. Rather, we aimed to show representative cases of the great mosaic of different ethnicities and habitats found in Brazil and the multiplicity of practices therein. We valued the social phenomena arising from the people's initiatives, which demonstrate the cultural wealth, diversity of skills, relationships established with local nature and efforts undertaken by these productive groups to ensure social and environmental justice from their territories of origin.

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¹ Interview given by Rosani Schiller to Evelise Rüttschilling on the 30th of November 2021

² Interview given by Nelsa Nespolo to Eloisa Artuso on the 6th of October 2021

³ <http://portal.unisolbrasil.org.br/>

⁴ <http://poloprobio.org.br/>

⁵ Quilombolas are the descendants of the 'quilombos', communities formed by fugitive enslaved people between the sixteenth century and 1888, the year of the abolition of slavery in Brazil. Currently, quilombola communities are present throughout the Brazilian territory. Although quilombola land rights have been guaranteed by the Federal Government of Brazil since 2003, the communities still face threats such as the invasion by illegal loggers and miners and suffer from difficulties in accessing services such as health and education. Quilombola communities define themselves based on specific relationships with the land, kinship, territory, ancestry, traditions and cultural practices. Quilombos are a guarantee of their physical, social, economic and cultural reproduction. As part of a historic repair, the land tenure regularisation policy in quilombola territories is of great importance for dignity and to guarantee the continuity of these ethnic groups (Brasil Escola n.d.; INCRA 2022).

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