

FOREWORD BY JESSE JACKSON

An Afro-Brazilian
Woman's Story of
Politics and Love

MEDEA BENJAMIN
MAISA MENDONÇA

UNIVERSITY OF
NOTTINGHAM

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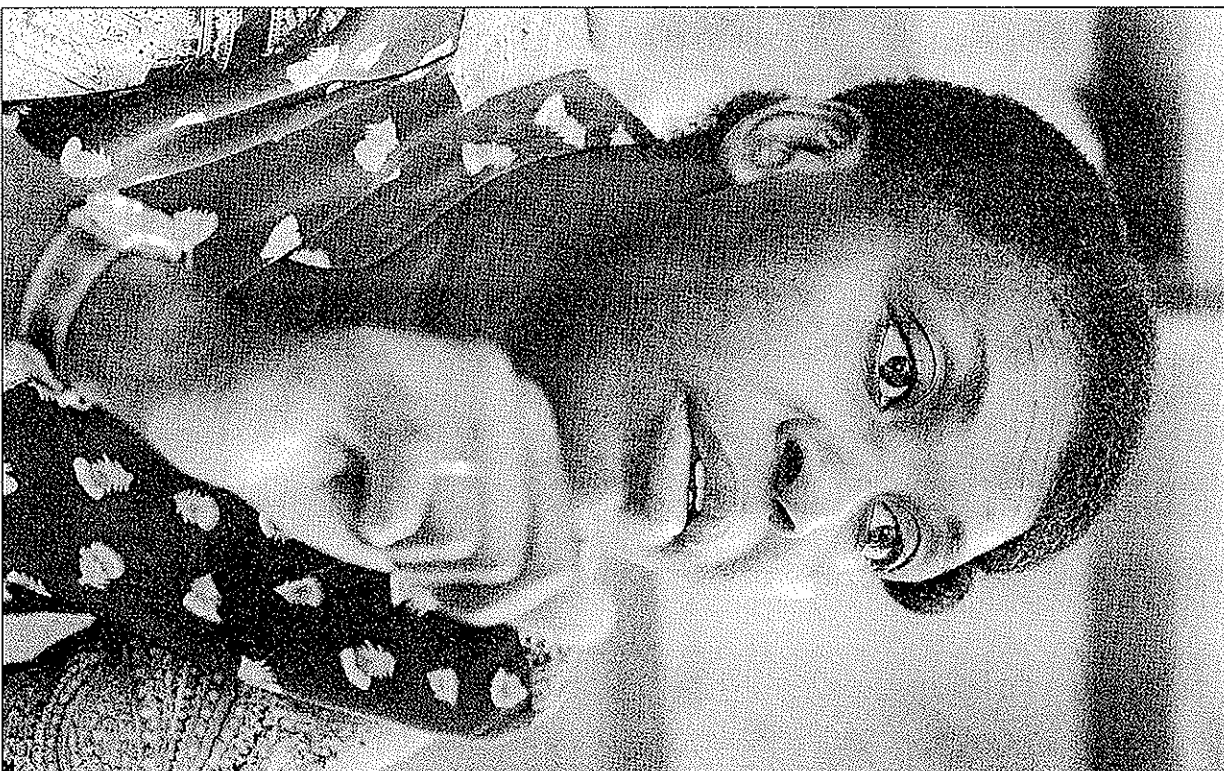


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Foreword

by Reverend Jesse Jackson

For a number of years, human rights activists here in the USA have been aware of and followed with interest the varied activities of Senator Benedita da Silva. Now she has given us this autobiographical record of the highlights of her life experiences, tragedy and triumph, sorrows and successes.

In these pages we learn about the everyday life among the urban poor of Brazil who, as in our country, number in the millions. The *favelas* of Brazil are the ghettos and barrios of the USA. In both countries, it is the children who suffer the most. Benedita knows this all too well, as her own childhood was marked by extreme poverty.

The book's straightforward, eloquent narrative reveals to us an admirable strength of character and a passionate commitment to the struggle against racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. In some way, the mission of relevant leadership is to disturb the comfortable in order to promote social change. Benedita has done just that. As a working-class organizer, feminist, parliamentarian, and defender of street children, Benedita da Silva has taken on formidable powers and forced them to change course. And like so many of our activists in the civil rights movement, Benedita's strength and fortitude is firmly anchored in a faith-based vision of her community.

Senator da Silva, as an Afro-Brazilian, is a member of the largest community of people of African heritage in our hemisphere. Slavery, racism and colonialism produced the odious western trade in human cargo and resulted in our community being uprooted and scattered all over the earth—from Rio and Port au Prince to Savannah and New York. Where our African ancestors were

dropped off was merely a matter of a boat stop. Benedita's success in overcoming tremendous obstacles is therefore a success that our entire community should celebrate. And the realization of her dream will open the way for others to fulfill dreams of their own.

On a recent visit to Brazil, I had the opportunity to spend an afternoon visiting with Benedita and some of her neighbors at her house in the Chapéu Mangueira *favela* in Rio de Janeiro. It was a joyous occasion, which I and our Rainbow delegation will long remember with appreciation.

This autobiography is a publishing event of great importance. It is my fervent hope that this American edition will be widely read and discussed in every part of our country. It can open up avenues of international understanding and friendship that will help keep hope alive.

Rev. Jesse D. Jackson, Sr.
 Founder and President, National Rainbow Coalition

Preface

MY life is replicated in the lives of the many Beneditas, Marias, and Terezas that I represent: poor black women from the *favelas*, the slums. I live in a country of 30 million impoverished people, people who can't read and write, people who live in cardboard shacks in the shantytowns, under bridges, on the streets. I know their stories, because I have lived it myself.

I've been through many desperate times in my life. I saw my first child buried like a pauper. The image of my baby inside that little box will always be etched in my memory. I have a spiritual understanding of death, but that death was a violent one. I saw the precious baby I carried in my womb die, and I didn't have the means to bury him with dignity. I've been to the bottom of the well of despair and I know that unless you have something to keep you strong, you can go crazy or kill yourself. I was lucky to have a family who supported me and gave me the strength to survive.

I want this book to not only convey the sad times I've lived through, but to also portray the story of a champion—a champion who is not alone, who doesn't keep the trophy for herself. My trophy is shared with all those who are poor, discriminated against, dispossessed, down and out. They are the ones who inspire me.

I had hoped that this book would be written by a woman who had, like me, experienced what it is like to be discriminated against because of her social class or the color of her skin. I wanted it to be written by a black woman who could identify with what I have been through. This dream did not come true because my dear friend Lélia Gonzalez, who was planning to write my life story, is no longer with us. Even after her death, Lélia continues to be a great inspiration to me. That is why I want to dedicate this book to her.

When Maisa and Medea approached me to write a book and produce a video about my life, I was hesitant. I am a very private

person and I couldn't imagine exposing my inner thoughts to people I hardly knew. But this time I had just returned from the Fourth International Women's Conference in Beijing, and I was moved by the opportunity to exchange experiences with so many wonderful women. I realized that this book could help me communicate with women around the world and perhaps even inspire other women who don't have the privilege of having someone record their life story.

I want to thank Maisa and Medea for making this project possible. We laughed together, we cried together, we talked about everything from my private life to my political dreams.

I also want to thank the readers for taking an interest in my life. You, too, may be of different races and classes, but I'm certain we share some of the same hopes and dreams for a better world. It would be wonderful if my story could give you just a bit more courage and strength to help build that world.

Acknowledgments

In Brazil, we are indebted to Bené's family for welcoming us into their lives: her husband Councilman Antônio Pitanga, her daughter Nilceia da Silva and her son Pedro Paulo da Silva. Bené's staff and advisors helped squeeze us into her jam-packed schedule and allowed us to comb through their archives. Special thanks to Cicera Moraes, Zulmira Pereira da Silva and Cleonice dos Santos in Brasília; and in Rio, Val Carvalho, Nelda Fabiano dos Santos, Mozart Porro Rangel, Ana Paula Costa, Jaime Muniz Martins, Antônio Galuzzio, Sandra Martins, Mauro Alemão, Everaldo Pereira and Ezequiel dos Santos. We also want to thank journalist Dulce Maria Pereira and Nani Stuart, the Workers Party Foreign Relations Advisor, for helping us make the first contact with Bené. For the Portuguese edition, we are thankful to Isabel Mauad, from Mauad Publishers in Rio.

Our whirlwind schedule while taping the interviews in Brazil would have been impossible without the unfailing support of Maisa's family in Rio: her mother Suely, her sister Luciana, and her grandmothers Margot and Ana. We owe an eternal debt to Medea's wonderful husband Kevin Danaher and children, Arlen and Maya, for putting up with all the late evening and weekend sessions while we sandwiched the book between full-time work.

In the U.S., we are ever grateful to the staff and board of Global Exchange for their enthusiastic support, particularly Co-Director Kirsten Moller, Rodrigo Gonzales and Jennifer Carriño for useful feedback, Elizabeth Wilcox and Lisa Russ for fundraising assistance, Tony Newman for his public relations work, and interns Jennifer Sanders, Megan Mylan, Marta Montoro and Eileen Moore. Other readers whose feedback was extremely helpful were Neyde Trindade, Michael Shellenberger, Elaine Karzenberger and Norman Solomon. We would especially like to thank our pub-

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We would never have been able to embark on this project without the generous assistance of several friends, particularly Kit Miller, Susanne Browne, Richard Siemens and Eric Leenson from Progressive Asset Management. Thanks to Bluma Cohen from the Jarulzelsky Foundation for her encouragement.

For research support, we thank Beto Borges, with the Rainforest Action Network; Cains Brandão, with the International Child Resource Institute; and Tarciso Costa, consul adjunct at the Brazilian Consulate in San Francisco. In Brazil, photographer Jorge Nunes was extremely helpful in letting us dig into his precious archive.

This book has already sparked a series of exchanges between Brazilian and U.S. women. We are grateful to Cecilia dos Santos, Marcia Meireles, Sueli Carneiro, Jurema Werneck and Maria José Araújo for helping us contact the women's groups in Brazil. We have received encouragement and support from many women's organizations, as well as from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Finally, we'd like to thank Benedita da Silva, for so generously sharing with us her life, her thoughts, and her dreams. We hope we have done justice to them.

Introduction

This book is based on a series of interviews with Benedita da Silva, or Bené, as she is affectionately known. Bené is the first poor, black woman from the *favelas*, the shantytowns, to become a major political figure in Brazil. By recounting her amazing odyssey from Rio's *favelas* to the nation's Senate, the book brings to life one of Brazil's most popular political figures.

Going to bed hungry as a child and then watching her own children go hungry, Bené portrays the tragedy of Brazil's poor. Fighting to bring water and electricity to her *favela* and then becoming a founding member of the Workers Party, she embodies the strength of Brazilian activists. Rejecting the passive female role and taking the male-dominated world of politics by storm, she represents Brazil's "new woman."

When we first interviewed Bené, it was a lazy Sunday. In her sandals and house dress, she was strolling through the *favela* where she has lived all her life, visiting the Neighborhood Association and trying to arrange a more convenient living situation for a poor, elderly friend who could hardly walk. But the pace picked up as she rushed home to put on an elegant silk suit and called her driver to take her to the luxurious Governor's Palace, where she gave a speech to commemorate 300 years of black resistance to slavery and received an award for her efforts to eliminate racism. From there she was off to a reception at a cultural center for the launching of a book about the lives of four black women artists, but not forgetting to first swing by to pick up her granddaughter Ana Benedita at her ballet school. Bené ended the day by attending evening mass at her church and chatting with the pastor about ongoing church projects. This was a "relaxing Sunday."

To witness Bené's week-day activities, we followed her on the two-hour plane ride from her home in Rio to the nation's capital,

Brasilia, where she commutes virtually every week to carry out her duties as Senator. Her typical day in Brasilia starts at 8:00 A.M. and ends at about 11:00 P.M. Her time is filled with meetings with everyone from grassroots organizers to businessmen, Senate hearings on critical economic issues and press interviews. There are days when she has no time to eat, warming up a late-night bowl of vegetable soup before dragging herself to bed.

Despite her harried schedule, Bené makes time for her family and friends when she is back home in Rio. We had the pleasure of tasting the Senator's delicious home cooking at a family gathering at her house in the *favela*, where Bené, her son, daughter and husband argued vehemently about soccer teams while the grandchildren danced to funk music on the patio outside. We went to a Christmas potluck party at her office in Rio, where the staff showed their affection by giving her a sexy nightgown for her "romantic nights with Pitanga," her husband.

We accompanied Bené in moments of joy, like the wedding of one of her advisors, where she delivered a moving speech about love conquering all. There were also moments of great sorrow, like the funeral for a young mother from Bené's *favela* who died from an intestinal obstruction that was misdiagnosed and mistreated at a public hospital for the poor.

We witnessed Bené's strong spiritual side when we watched her at church and community activities organized by her pastor. On the surface, her conservative Evangelical religion seems to clash with her progressive political views. In fact, many of her colleagues in the Workers Party remain baffled by her religious affiliation. Only after hearing her entire life story did we begin to understand this apparent contradiction.

We were struck by the graceful way Bené moves in and out of the most diverse circles imaginable. In a gathering of blacks or whites, men or women, rich or poor, Bené holds her ground with great dignity. In the Senate, she is mostly surrounded by rich, white

men. Although she fights them tooth and nail on economic policies, she greets them with a broad smile. She moves with ease from an austere Evangelical church service in a white, middle-class suburb to a meeting of leaders in the black movement.

To try to grasp Bené's complexities, we supplemented the interviews with archival material. We poured through newspaper clippings and transcripts of the political speeches she has made over the years. We interviewed Bené's friends, family, advisors and the public at large. The result is an intriguing mix of her personal experiences with her political vision.

While famous in Brazil, Bené is virtually unknown to U.S. audiences. But then again, so is Brazil. Most Americans know about Rio's Carnival, Pelé and his soccer feats, and perhaps the destruction of the Amazon rain forest. They may have even heard of the plight of Brazil's street children.

Hidden, however, is the vibrant political life of this vast nation. Hidden are the political parties that present a greater range of opinion than our own, the plethora of non-governmental organizations that have created a vigorous "civil society," the women like Benedita da Silva who have challenged Brazil's *macho* culture and shattered gender stereotypes. We hope that this book helps unmask the "real Brazil." By publishing the book simultaneously in English and Portuguese, we also hope to stimulate new ties between people in the U.S. and Brazil who are seeking creative ways to address poverty, racism, gender inequalities and other social problems.

We hope this book does justice to a woman who is one of Brazil's most popular political figures and offers a ray of hope for so many of her nation's poor.