

Brazilian Peasant

Maria Sanchez, resident of a shantytown

My name is Maria Sanchez. I live in a *favela*, or poor area, in a city on the east coast of Brazil. It is a shantytown, but almost 120 000 poor Brazilians live here. Our homes are shacks or huts, made from left-over material. The town is built on the side of a hill and is a source of cheap labour for nearby neighbourhoods where rich people live. My husband and I did not go to school beyond Grade 4. Because we have few skills, both of us are employed in very low-paying jobs even though we work long hours. The only place we can afford to live is in this shantytown.

Our two oldest children quit school when they were 10 years old. You might think that sounds like fun, but they stopped going to school so that they could earn money by sorting garbage. We need the little money they make to help our family survive. The youngest children are not yet old enough to help the family but by the time they are 10 years old, they will be working too.

To live in my community is to survive the most horrible of conditions. The poorest live near the top of the hill, which means a long steep climb to and from their huts every day. Only a few are fortunate to have electricity and running water. The homes are very close together. There is no sewage system in the *favela* and garbage is rarely collected. The smell is horrible because human and animal sewage runs down the narrow passageways. The presence of chickens, pigs, dogs and cats adds to the stench and makes it unbearable. Unless we are able to find better jobs and leave the *favela*, I do not see much hope for our family.

The public school that Juan and Maria used to attend and that Carmella now attends is old and barely standing. Most of the teachers are poorly educated themselves. It is difficult for them to teach in classes that are overcrowded, with few textbooks. It is even more difficult for any of the children to learn in these conditions. My husband and I desperately want our children to receive a good education and have a better life.

We do our best to feed our children, but it is often difficult to find the good food they need to stay healthy. The doctor at the clinic says we are not feeding our children properly. They are suffering from malnutrition, very common among children in our *favela*. We have no money to buy the medicine we need when we are ill and we are not allowed to take the time off work to seek medical treatment. The medical clinics are overcrowded with only a few doctors and nurses. The medical equipment in these clinics is old; most is broken. Unlike the hospitals where the rich people go, our clinics are rarely cleaned.

I fear for the safety of my family. Violence is now very common in our *favela*. Children steal in order to help their families. Because they are unable to care for them, many

parents abandon their children. Someone told me there are seven to eight million abandoned children in the streets of Brazil! As a country, we are unable or unwilling to look after the most helpless of our people. Many children are homeless and in order to survive they form street families. They rob tourists and locals alike, and become more violent all the time. Drugs are very common and the drug dealers now control our *favela*. Other kinds of criminal activities include burglary and kidnapping for ransom. We fear the police too, as they are violent when dealing with our people. Many street children have been killed by police officers for crimes such as pickpocketing and even for no crime at all. I am afraid that my own children will get hurt or turn to a life of crime because they will see it as the only way to survive.

The people who live in the rich part of town depend upon those of us who live in the *favela* to clean their homes, tend their yards, care for their children and work in the fancy resorts as maids, cooks, chauffeurs and gardeners. It is so unfair that the rich live in magnificent homes near the ocean and my people are forced to move away from the city so the rich can have the best locations. Never can I expect to own land here or to rise above my current situation. My children will be condemned to the same life unless something changes.

Right now, one percent of the rich landowners control over half of all the land in Brazil. I hear that the government is allowing some people like me to occupy unused land in part of the Amazon area in northern Brazil. People have joined together there to grow crops. They have organized their own rules against drugs, alcohol and bad behaviour and have set up a school. If I could just get some of that land, I know I would be able to grow enough food and raise enough animals to feed my family properly. Life would be so much better.

There are also other jobs in the Amazon. The forestry industry needs people to log the trees. Cutting down trees enables farmers to plant sugar cane and ranchers to raise cattle. Both of these industries supply jobs. As well, there is iron ore in this area. Many workers will be needed to mine the ore. My husband and I are willing to work hard at any of these jobs.

Those of us living in the *favela* are barely surviving. Think about my family. Don't we deserve the right to breathe clean air and eat good food? Should we have to fear for our lives every day? Shouldn't I have the right to receive a decent wage for my labour? Don't my children deserve an education that will help them get a good start in life? The only hope my family has of owning land and earning a good living is if we move to the rain forest area. We must continue to hope that one day we may live in the Amazon, no matter what the outsiders may think.

Adapted from Don Northey, Jan Nicol and Roland Case, eds., *Brazilian Rain Forest* (Vancouver, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2002). Permission granted by The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta teachers.