

Without women there is no food sovereignty

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Systems of food production and consumption have always been socially organized, but their organization has varied historically. In the last few decades, under the impact of neoliberal politics, the logic of capitalism has been imposed upon the ways in which food is produced and consumed (Bello, 2009). [[1](#)]

This article analyzes the impact of agro-industrial policies on women and the key role that peasant women in the Global North and South play in the production and distribution of food. It analyzes how the dominant agricultural model can incorporate a feminist perspective and how the social movements that work towards food sovereignty can incorporate a feminist perspective.

Campesinas and invisible women

In the countries of the Global South women are the primary producers of food, the ones in charge of working the earth, maintaining seed stores, harvesting fruit, obtaining water and safeguarding the harvest. Between 60 to 80% of food production in the Global South is done by women (50% worldwide) (FAO, 1996). Women are the primary producers of basic grains such as rice, wheat, and corn which feed the most impoverished populations in the South. Despite their key role in agriculture and food however, women; together with their children; are the ones most affected by hunger.

For centuries, peasant women have been responsible for domestic chores, the care and feeding of their families, the cultivation, exchange and commercialization of household gardens; charged with reproduction, production and community—all the while occupying an often invisible domestic and social sphere. The main economic transactions in agriculture have traditionally been undertaken by men in markets, with the purchase and sale of animals, and the commercialization of large quantities of grains in the private and public sphere.

This division of roles, assigning women as the caretakers of the house as well as the health and education of their families, and granting men the “technical” management of land and machinery, maintains the assigned gender roles that have persisted in our societies through the centuries and into the present (Oceransky Losana, 2006).

The figures speak for themselves. According to data from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 1996), in many African countries women represent 70% of the field labor; are responsible for supplying 90% of the domestic water supply and are responsible for between 60 and 80% of the production of food consumed and sold by the family. They account for 100% of the processing of foods, 80% of the activities of food storage and transportation, and 90% of the labor involved in preparing the earth before planting. These numbers demonstrate the crucial role that African women have in the production of small-scale agriculture and the maintenance of their families' subsistence.

In many regions of the Global South however—in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia—there is a notable “feminization” of salaried agricultural work, especially in non-traditional export-oriented sectors (Fraser, 2009). Between 1994 and 2000, according to White and Leavy (2003), women made up 83% of new employees in the non-traditional agro-export sector. In this way, for the first time, many women have paid jobs with economic gains that give them more power in decision making and the possibility of participating in organizations outside of the family (Fraser, 2009). However, this dynamic shift has been accompanied by a marked gender division in job duties: on plantations, women perform the unskilled work such as gathering and boxing while men bring in the harvest and plant.

The incorporation of women into salaried labor means a double burden of work for women who continue to care for their families while at the same time working to obtain income—principally in precarious jobs. Poorer labor conditions than those of their male counterparts, along with inferior pay for the same jobs, forces women to work more hours in order to receive the same income. In India, for example, the average salary for day labor in the agricultural sector is 30% less for women than men (World Bank, 2007). In Spain, women make 30% less, and this difference can be as high as 40% (Oceransky Losana, 2006).

Impact of neoliberal policies

The application of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 80s and 90s in the Global South on the part of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, further aggravated already difficult conditions for much of the population in those countries and hit women especially hard.

The shock measures imposed by the SAPs consisted of forcing Southern governments to withdraw all subsidies for staples like bread, rice, milk and sugar. Drastic reductions in public education, health, housing and infrastructure spending were imposed. The forced devaluation of national currency (to cheapen exports) diminished the purchasing capacity of local populations. Increased interest rates to attract foreign capital generated a speculative spiral. These SAPs added to the extreme poverty of many in the Global South (Vivas, 2008).

Structural Adjustment Policies and privatization had major repercussions for women in particular. As Juana Ferrer of the International Gender Commission of Via Campesina illustrates: “In the processes of privatization of public services, the most affected people have been women. Women have been affected above all in the fields of health and education where they have historically carried [the most] responsibility for their families. ... In the measure [to which] we do not have access to resources and public services it becomes more difficult to lead a worthwhile life for women” (La Via Campesina, 2006: 30).

The collapse of the countryside in the Global South and the intensification of migration to cities has led to a process of “de-peasantization” (Bello, 2009). In many countries this process has not taken the form of a classic rural to urban movement, in which ex-peasants go to the cities to work in factories

as part of the industrialization process. Rather, migration has been characterized by a process of “urbanization disconnected from industrialization” in which ex-peasants, pushed into the cities, are then fed back to the periphery (favelas, slums), many living off the informal economy and comprising the “informal proletariat” (Davis, 2006).

Women are an essential component in these national and international migratory flows. Migration leads to the dismantling and abandonment of families, land, and processes of production, while increasing the burdens of family and community on the women who stay behind. In Europe, the United States and Canada women who do migrate take work that European and North American women have not performed for years, thus reproducing an invisible spiral of oppression, as the Global North externalizes its care, social and economic costs to communities of migrant women origin.

The inability to resolve the current health care crisis in Western countries has resulted in the incorporation of large numbers of women into the labor market. Additionally, the aging population of Western countries and the non-responsiveness of the state to their needs has served as an alibi for the importation of millions of “caretakers” from the Global South. As is noted by Ezquerro (2010) “[This] diaspora fills the function of making the incompatibility between the rise of the capitalist system and the maintenance of life in the Centre invisible, and deepens the crisis of care and other crises in the South. ... The ‘international chain of care’ becomes a dramatic vicious cycle that ensures survival of the patriarchal capitalist system” (Ezquerro, 2010:39).

Access to land

Access to land is not a guaranteed right for many women. In numerous Southern countries laws forbid this right, and in those countries where legal access exists there are often traditions and practices that prevent women from property ownership. As Fraser (2009) explains, “In Cambodia, for example, although it is not illegal for women to own land, the cultural norm dictates that they do not possess land; although they are responsible for farm production and agriculture, women have no control over the sale of land or how it is transmitted to children” (Fraser, 2009:34).

In India, Chukki Nanjundaswamy of the peasant organization Karnataka State Farmers Association [2] notes that the situation of women with regards to land and health care access is very difficult: “Socially Indian peasant women have almost no rights and are considered an ‘addition’ to males. Rural women are the most untouchable of the untouchables within the social caste system” (La Via Campesina, 2006: 16).

Access to land for women in Africa today is even more precarious due to increased deaths from AIDS. On the one hand, women are more likely to be infected, but when one of their male relatives who holds title to the land dies, women have great difficulty accessing control. In many communities, women have no right to inherit, and therefore lose their land and other assets when they are widowed (Jayne et al, 2006).

Land is a very important asset—it allows for the production of food, serves as an investment for the future; and as collateral it implies access to credit, etc. The difficulties women have securing access to land is one more example of how the capitalist and patriarchal agricultural system hits them especially hard. Furthermore, when women do hold title to land, it is mostly lower value land or extension properties.

Women also face more difficulty in obtaining loans, services, and supplies. Globally, it is estimated that women receive only 1% of total agricultural loans, and even so, it is not clear who in the family

exercises control over those loans (Fraser, 2009).

These practices do not only exist in the Global South. In Europe, for example, many women farmers work under complete legal uncertainty. Most of them work on family farms where administrative rights are the exclusive property of the owner of the farm—and women are not entitled to aid, planting, lactic share, etc.

As Elizabeth Vilalba Seivane, secretary of Labrego Galego in Galicia explains, the problems of women in the field—in the South and the North—have much in common despite some obvious differences, “European women are more focused on fighting for our administrative rights on the farm, while elsewhere profound changes are demanded that have to do with land reform or access to land and other basic resources” (La Via Campesina, 2006: 26).

In the US, Debra Eschmeyer of the National Family Farm Coalition explains practices that show this inequality: “For example, when a women farmer goes alone to seek a loan from a bank it is far more complicated [than] if a male farmer seeks a loan” (La Via Campesina, 2006: 14).

Agribusiness vs. food sovereignty

Today, the current agro-industrial model has proven unable to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, in addition to being destructive to the environment. We are facing a food and agricultural system with a high concentration of companies along the entire chain. It is monopolized by a handful of multinational agribusinesses and backed by governments and international institutions that have become accomplices, if not co-beneficiaries, in an unsustainable food production system. This model is an imperialist tool aimed at political, economic and social control over the Global South by the North’s major economic powers like the United States and the European Union (Toussaint, 2008; Vivas, 2009).

As Desmarais (2007) notes, the food system can be understood as a broad horizontal chain that has been taking more and more away from production and consumption in favor of the appropriation of various stages of production by agribusiness, leading to the loss of peasant autonomy.

The food crisis that erupted during 2007 and 2008, caused a strong increase in the price of staple foods⁴, highlighting the high volatility of agriculture and the food system. It also introduced the figure of over one billion hungry people in the world—one person in six, according to data from the FAO (2009).

The problem is not a lack of food, but rather the inability to access it. In fact, grain production worldwide has tripled since the 60’s, while the global population has only doubled (GRAIN, 2008). We can see that there is enough food to feed the entire global population. However, for the millions of people in developing countries who spend between 50% and 60% of their income on food (up to 80% in the poorest countries), rising prices make it impossible to access. [3]

There are fundamental reasons that explain the deep food crisis. Neoliberal policies applied indiscriminately over the past thirty years on a global scale forced vulnerable markets to open up to the global economy. Payments of debt by the South led to the privatization of formerly public goods and services (water, agricultural protections). Add to this a model of agriculture and food production in the service of capitalist logic, and you have the main contributing factors to the situation that has dismantled a once-successful model of peasant agriculture that had guaranteed people’s food security for decades (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2010). This has had a very negative impact on people, particularly women, and the environment.

Food Sovereignty is a powerful alternative to this destructive agricultural model. This paradigm promotes “the right of peoples to define their own agricultural policies and ... to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and the domestic market” (VVAA, 2003: 1). Food sovereignty seeks to regain the right to decide what, how and where to produce what we eat. It promotes the idea that the land, water, and seeds are in peasants’ hands, and that we deserve to control our food systems.

There is an inherent feminist perspective incorporated in food sovereignty. As pointed out by Yoon Guem Soon, a Korean peasant woman and representative of Via Campesina in Asia: “Feminism is a process for getting a decent place for women in society, to combat violence against women and to claim and reclaim our land and save it from the hands of multinationals and large companies. Feminism is the way for rural women to take an active and worthy role within society” (La Via Campesina, 2006:12).

La Via Campesina

Via Campesina is the world’s foremost international movement of small farmers. It promotes the right of all peoples to food sovereignty. Via Campesina was established in 1993 at the dawn of the anti-globalization movement, and gradually became one of the major organizations in the critique of neoliberal globalization. Its ascent is an expression of peasant resistance to the collapse of the rural world caused by neoliberal policies, and the intensification of those policies as embodied in the World Trade Organization (Antentas and Vivas, 2009a).

Since its founding, Via Campesina has promoted a “female peasant” identity that is politicized, linked to land, food production and the defense of food sovereignty—built in opposition to the current agribusiness model (Desmarais, 2007). Via Campesina embodies a new kind of “peasant internationalism” (Bello, 2009), that can be viewed as a “peasant component” of the new international resistance presented by the anti-globalization movement (Antentas and Vivas, 2009).

In 1996, coinciding with the World Food Summit at the FAO in Rome, Via Campesina highlighted food sovereignty as a political alternative to a profoundly unfair and predatory food system. This does not imply a romantic return to the past, but rather recovers knowledge and traditional practices and combines them with new technologies and new knowledge (Desmarais, 2007). As noted by McMichael (2006), there is a “mystification of the small” in a way that rethinks the global food system to encourage democratic forms of food production and distribution.

A feminist perspective

Over time, Via Campesina has incorporated a feminist perspective, working to achieve gender equality within their organizations, and building alliances with feminist groups, including the international World March of Women, among others.

At the heart of La Via Campesina, the struggle of women is situated at two levels: defending their rights as women within organizations and society in general, and the struggle as peasant women together with their colleagues against the neoliberal model of agriculture (EHNE and La Via Campesina 2009).

Feminist work in Via Campesina has taken important steps forward since its inception. In the First International Conference in Mons (Belgium) in 1993, all the elected coordinators were men. In the final declaration the situation of rural women hardly received any mention. Although it identified the

need to integrate women's needs in the work of Via Campesina, the conference failed to establish mechanisms to ensure participation of women in successive meetings. Thus, at the 2nd International Conference in Tlaxcala (Mexico) in 1996, the percentage of women attending was 20% of the total: the same as at the 1st International Conference. To address this issue, a special women's committee was created (later known as the Women's Committee of La Via Campesina) and methods that permitted better representation and participation were enacted.

This move facilitated the incorporation of feminist analysis in Via Campesina. Thus, when Via Campesina publicly presented the concept of food sovereignty at the World Food Summit of FAO in Rome in 1996, women contributed their own demands. These included the need to produce food locally, and they added the dimension of "human health" to "sustainable agricultural practices," demanding a drastic reduction in harmful chemical inputs and advocating the active promotion of organic agriculture. Women also insisted that food sovereignty could not be accomplished without greater female participation in the definition of rural policies (Desmarais, 2007).

For Francisca Rodriguez of the peasant association ANAMURI in Chile: "Acknowledging the reality and demands of rural women has been a challenge in all peasant movements. ... The history of this acknowledgement has gone through various stages of struggle for recognition from within, to break with the chauvinist organizations ... over the past twenty years, rural women's organizations have gained [an] identity ... we have reconstructed as women in a half-labored rural locale," (Mugarik Gabe, 2006:254).

The work of the Women's Commission helped promote exchanges between women from different countries, including women-specific meetings to coincide with international summits. Between 1996 and 2000, the Commission's work focused mainly on Latin America—through training, exchange and discussion—and rural women increased their participation in all levels and activities of La Via Campesina.

As Annette Desmarais noted, "In most countries, agricultural and rural organizations are dominated by men. The women of La Via Campesina refuse to accept these subordinate positions. While acknowledging the long and difficult road ahead, women accept the challenge with enthusiasm, and vow to carry out a major role in shaping the Via Campesina as a movement committed to gender equality" (Desmarais, 2007:265).

In October 2000, just before the 3rd International Conference of La Via Campesina in Bangalore (India), the 1st International Assembly of Women Farmers was organized. This allowed for greater participation of women in the organization. The Assembly adopted three major goals: 1) to ensure the participation of 50% of women at all levels of decisions and activities of La Via Campesina, 2) to maintain and strengthen the Women's Commission, and 3) to ensure that documents, training events and speeches of Via Campesina did not have sexist content or sexist language (Desmarais, 2007).

Members at the conference agreed to change the institutional structure to ensure gender equity. As Paul Nicholson of La Via Campesina notes: "[In Bangalore] it was determined that equality of man and woman in spaces and positions of representation in our organization opened a whole internal process of reflection on the role of women in the struggle for women peasants' rights. ... The gender perspective is being addressed now in a serious way, not only in the context of parity in responsibilities, but also a profound debate about the roots and tentacles of patriarchy and violence against women in the rural world." (Food Sovereignty, Biodiversity and Cultures 2010: 8).

This strategy forced the member organizations of Via Campesina at national and regional levels to rethink their work in a gender perspective and to incorporate new measures to strengthen the role of women (Desmarais, 2007). Josie Riffaud of the Confédération Paysanne in France, states that:

“the decision was critical of [lack of gender] parity in the Via Campesina, as allowed in my organization, the Confédération Paysanne. We also apply this measure.” (La Via Campesina, 2006: 15).

As part of the 4th International Conference in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in June 2004; the 2nd International Assembly of Women Farmers brought together more than a hundred women from 47 countries on all continents. The main lines of action that emerged from the meeting were to take action against physical and sexual violence against women; both domestically and internationally; demand equal rights and invest in education. As its final statement states: “We demand our right to a dignified life, respect for our sexual and reproductive rights; and the immediate implementation of measures to eradicate all forms of physical, sexual, verbal and psychological violence. ... We urge states to implement measures to ensure our economic autonomy, access to land, health, education and equal social status.” (2nd International Assembly of Women Farmers, 2004).

In October 2006, the World Congress of Women of La Via Campesina was highlighted in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Participants included women from agricultural organizations in Asia, North America, Europe, Africa and Latin America; with the objective of analyzing and discussing the meaning of equality in the field from a feminist perspective, and a plan of action to achieve it. As one of the presentations—Sergia Galván’s Women’s Health Collective of the Dominican Republic—pointed out, the women of La Via Campesina had three challenges ahead: 1) to advance the theoretical discussion to incorporate the feminist peasant perspective in mainstream feminist analysis, 2) continue work on autonomy as a vital reference for the consolidation of the movement of rural women, and 3) to overcome the feeling of guilt in the struggle for higher positions of power over men (La Via Campesina, 2006).

The World Congress of Women of La Via Campesina emphasized the need to further strengthen the articulation of women of La Via Campesina, and created mechanisms for a greater exchange of information and specific plans for struggle. Among the concrete proposals were the articulation of a global campaign to combat violence perpetrated against women, to extend the discussion to all organizations that are part of Via Campesina, and to work to recognize the rights of rural women in demanding equality in access to land, credit, markets and administrative rights (La Via Campesina, 2006).

At the 5th International Conference in Maputo, Mozambique, in October 2008, La Via Campesina hosted the 3rd International Assembly of Women. The assembly approved the launch of a campaign targeting all forms of violence faced by women in society (physical, economic, social, sexist, cultural, and access to power) which are also present in rural communities and their organizations.

Work that aims at achieving greater gender equality is not easy. Despite the formal equality, women face obstacles when traveling or attending meetings and gatherings. As Annette Desmarais (2007:282) noted, “There are many reasons why women do not participate at this level. Perhaps the most important is the persistence of ideologies and cultural practices that perpetuate unequal gender relations and unfairness. For example, the division of labor by gender means that rural women have less access to the most precious resource, time, to participate as leaders in agricultural organizations. Being involved in reproductive, productive and community work makes it much less likely [for women] to have time for training sessions and learning as leaders.”

It is a struggle against the tide, and despite some concrete victories, we face a long fight in our organizations; and, more generally, socially.

Weaving Alliances

La Via Campesina has established alliances with various organizations and social movements at the international, regional, and national levels. One of the most significant alliances has been with the World March of Women, a leading feminist global network that has called for joint actions and meetings, and has collaborated in activities: the International Forum for Food Sovereignty held in Mali in 2007, among others.

The original meeting between the two networks was under the anti-globalization movement, and its purpose was to agree on counter-summits and activities within the World Social Forum. The incorporation of a feminist perspective within Via Campesina generated more solidarity, and this has built over time. At the Forum for Food Sovereignty in 2007 in Sélingué, Mali a meeting was convened by leading international social movements such as Via Campesina, the World March of Women, the World Forum of Fisher Peoples, and others to advance strategies within a wide range of social movements (farmers, fishers, consumers) to promote food sovereignty.

Women were a major catalyst in this meeting, as organizers and participants. The Nyéléni Forum in Sélingué was named in honor of the legend of a Malian peasant woman who struggled to assert herself as a woman in a hostile environment. Delegates from Africa, America, Europe, Asia and Oceania attended the meeting and identified the capitalist and patriarchal system as primarily responsible for the violations of women's rights, while reaffirming their commitment to transform it.

The World March of Women has taken up food sovereignty as an inalienable human right, especially for women. Miriam Nobre, coordinator of the international secretary of the World March of Women, participated in October 2006 at the World Congress of Women of La Via Campesina in the global feminist movement. The 7th International Meeting of the World March of Women in Vigo, Spain in October 2008, held a forum and exhibition for food sovereignty, showing the links between the feminist struggle and those of peasant women.

The success of this collaboration is embodied in the dual membership of women who are active members in the World March of Women, and La Via Campesina. These experiences encourage closer ties and collaboration between both networks, and strengthens the feminist struggle of rural women that is part of the broader struggle against capitalism and patriarchy.

Conclusion

The current global food system has failed to ensure the food security of communities. Currently more than a billion people worldwide suffer from hunger. The global food system has had a profoundly negative environmental impact; promoting an intensive agro-industrial model that has contributed to climate change and collapsing agro-biodiversity. This system has been particularly detrimental to women.

Developing alternatives to this agricultural model requires incorporating a gender perspective. The food sovereignty alternative to the dominant agro-industrial model has to have a feminist position to break with patriarchal and capitalist logic.

La Via Campesina, the largest international movement for food sovereignty, is moving in this direction: creating alliances with other social movements—especially feminist organizations and networks such as the World March of Women—to promote networking and solidarity among women in North and South, urban and rural areas, and between them and their companions. As Via

Campesina says: "Globalize the struggle. Globalize hope."

Esther Vivas

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Footnotes

[1] For a more detailed analysis of the historical evolution of the global food system see McMichael (2000).

[2] All women farmers mentioned in this article are part of member organizations of La Via Campesina.

[3] According to the index of food prices by FAO, recorded between 2005 and 2006, an increase of 12% the following year, in 2007, an increase of 24% between January and July 2008, a rise about 50%. Cereals and other staple foods were those that suffered the largest increases (Vivas, 2009).