

Women, food sovereignty and agroecology in Brazil and Latin America context

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The women's collective organization that emerges mainly in non-urban territories in Latin America have mobilized in the last two decades a set of actions, reflections and political-epistemic proposals at the interface between agroecology and feminism. Coming from a trajectory of struggle for land and resistance in the territories, which long precedes the current historical moment, these organized women have amalgamated contributions to thinking about policies to overcome the current moment of crisis.

In this article we systematize elements of collective action and proposals developed by organized women, seeking to contribute to bringing to light central elements of their proposals, demands and mobilizations around food sovereignty and agroecology.

About the many battles and collective resistances

In Brazil, since the 1950s rural women have had records of their political action in the process of struggle for land. Names such as the unionist Margarida Alves and the leader Elisabeth Teixeira in the Peasant Leagues are landmarks of that historic moment. However, it was during the period of redemocratization in the 1980s that the organization of rural women gained space and visibility as a new political subject, building its own political agendas to demand recognition as rural women workers. Since then, acting in mixed or autonomous movements, they have articulated actions aimed at claiming better conditions for the rural population before the State and simultaneously building paths for the recognition of their role as workers.

At that time, the central axis of the movement's claims was the social recognition of rural women as workers, living up to the rights and policies intended for the working class. Their main historical demands were access to social security, especially retirement, maternity leave, right to unionization, expansion of possibilities for productive autonomy, mainly through access to land, including titling and policies for the development of agriculture and production. It is worth mentioning that despite these achievements, it was only after the 2000s that public policies specifically dedicated to rural workers emerged.

In addition to these claims for rights and better living conditions that have a relationship with the rural context, their claims and organization also addressed broader contexts of vulnerability or economic and social marginality. Rural women as well as popular women⁴ in the outskirts of cities are mobilized to fight for basic infrastructure issues for their localities, such as water, electricity, food, roads, schools and transport. In the contexts of land occupation and mobilization of rural and peasant movements, women have a recognized role in the process of

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guaranteeing food and the structure of the encamped families through their collective work, and sometimes this is their first experience of political insertion, opening up possibilities for future actions by women in the settlements.

These efforts undertaken by women in the quest to give visibility to their work and their political agendas also motivated the creation of exclusively women's movements in the 1980s in Latin America, such as the Peasant Women's Movement (MMC), Rural Women's Movement (MMTR) and the Movement of Coco-babassu Breakers in Maranhão, created in Brazil.

More recently in Brazil, especially after the 2000s and the arrival of the workers' party to the federal government, some specific policies aimed at family farming gained strength. Although it represented progress for this segment, in general, women continued to have difficulty accessing these policies. The best-known financing program for small rural producers in Brazil, PRONAF, for example, created a specific line of credit aimed at women, PRONAF-WOMAN, only in 2003. In 2004, the Directorate of Policies for Rural Women (DPMR) was created, linked to the Ministry of Agriculture, dedicated to thinking in a more integrated way in the productive organization of rural women, and which launched, among other programs, in 2008, the National Valorization and Improving the Quality of Production for Rural Women Program, which included specific criteria aimed at valuing agroecology and food sovereignty in actions (2008). The Food Acquisition Program (PAA) created in 2003, and the National School Feeding Program (PNAE), were also public policies that had specific gender aspects and that were important in the mobilization and achievement of economic autonomy on the part of organized rural women, including based on agroecology.

These policies, although significant, were actions that took some time to arrive, compared to actions related to other demands of rural movements and, like many other public policies, had a series of limits in their reach for the entire national territory. However, even with their weaknesses, these were important policies in the organization and strengthening of women in the struggle for agroecology and maintenance of their lives and communities in the countryside. Unfortunately, the advance of conservative forces in the Brazilian government since 2016 has meant a setback for such policies, with the DPRM being extinct, and many policies cut due to lack of resources. Even with the difficulties magnified by the recent political and economic situation in Brazil, the organization of women around the struggle for better living conditions, guarantee of rights and around a socially fair and environmentally sustainable agriculture, remains.

The encounter with agroecology

Following this trajectory of development of female protagonism, we realize that the mobilization of rural and peasant women in Latin America around food security and food sovereignty and agroecology have tensioned and politicized themes that concern survival and human and planetary existence itself. And this constitutes a two-way street: their struggles strengthen the politicization of human life, at the same time that the organization through agroecology and food sovereignty politically support and strengthen organized women. As the authors Moreira, Ferreira and Siliprandi (2018) point out, agroecological practices potentially open spaces for women to face their condition of vulnerability and gain more power in the personal, productive, family and political spheres, however, this has not been enough to problematize the invisibility and powerlessness of rural women and overcome this situation.

Food security and sovereignty are directly related to the development of agroecology and

concern the realization of the universal right to regular and permanent access to quality food, in sufficient quantity, without compromising access to other essential needs of education, culture. Food sovereignty implies considering the cultural, political dimension, worldviews, a broader vision that encompasses the evolutionary development of food systems together with populations and their different sociocultural dimensions. From a gender and human rights perspective, food sovereignty implies aspects such as: questioning the power relations linked to access to natural resources, protecting and rescuing ancestral knowledge linked to food production and preparation, participating in decision-making at different levels of the productive chain; producing in decent working conditions and with the possibility of accessing healthy food; and assuming roles of co-responsibility between men and women regarding reproductive and care work.

Agroecology is considered by most authors who are dedicated to its study as the - Victor Toledo, Eduardo Sevilla Guzmán, Stephen Gliessman, Irene Cardoso, Marta Soler-Montiel, Emma Siliprandi, Helda Morales - as being both a scientific field, an agricultural and technological practice and a social movement. It proposes an epistemological and methodological change that provides new ways of doing science and practicing agriculture considering ecological, social and political aspects. When we refer to agroecology, as this integral political-epistemic-scientific proposal, we should not fail to identify and value every trajectory of political action, production of knowledge and daily work carried out by women individually, in their family production units or in a collective and associative in women's organizations units or in a collective and associative way in women's organizations. However, despite the undeniable participation of women in agroecology, they still do not have space in leadership positions, in public policies and in social recognition, compatible with their social role. This demanded from the women themselves a whole process of organization and struggle to constitute themselves and be recognized as political subjects. Part of this trajectory was the creation of numerous associations, cooperatives, exchange and consumption groups, social movements, participation in work groups in scientific associations, etc.

Food sovereignty and agroecological agriculture are not just about a few social groups or specific problems for women. It is necessary to be clear that the great modern agricultural industry does not feed the population. In Latin America in 2016, according to FAO, 6.6% of the population suffered from hunger (undernourishment) and the production of food that goes directly to people's plates was primarily supplied by family farming. In our continent, crops in the hands of small farmers represent more than 80% of the total, and are responsible for 30 to 40% of the regional agricultural GDP, being the biggest generator of employment in the rural area.

Currently, in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic, point out that with the restrictive measures implemented, such as circulation and trade blocks, highlighted the fragility of the globalized food system that becomes very evident and the imminence of shortages in many cities, especially the largest urban centers. The evidence of an unsustainable food system - and one that can be disrupted by events that are increasingly likely with climate change and pandemics - replaces agroecology and actions for agroecological transition as an alternative not only for rural and peasant families or small towns, but also as an environmentally sustainable and socially just agriculture-food paradigm to feed the urban population.

Therefore, the development of agroecology, articulated with actions for sovereignty and food security, are fundamental to develop and implement solutions for this crisis and others that possibly will come - women have been acting in this political and epistemic space in a central

way. It is possible to find in recent literature produced with an academic and/or organizational and militancy focus a series of reports by women in Latin American territories that show this strengthening and, from it, the expansion of social, political and economic gains, not only for women themselves, but fundamentally, extended to their territories and communities.

These practices are part of a historic struggle on the continent. We can say that women have been the pioneers and, to a large extent, the protagonists in denouncing the negative impacts of this agricultural model imposed on the countryside and in the organization of territorial resistance, and in solidarity networks, for the construction of community alternatives, regionally and internationally.

In fact, family farming and agroecological-based agriculture have never existed without the participation of women. Female participation has always been significant and, more than that, central within the agricultural family production organization and peasant family units. However, female work in family agriculture and also in agroecology has been considered more in line with its real contribution for just over two decades.

In the last two decades, women's mobilization and social movements around agroecology have strengthened and created links, through networks that continue to exist and act. In agroecology meetings and networks, themes related to gender and feminisms have been gaining ground, just as agroecology has also gained more prominence within women's collectives, organizations and movements. We perceive a two-way street of strengthening that is established between the struggle of rural women and for agroecology.

This can be seen in Brazil with the production and dissemination of several publications on the subject in the last decade. These publications highlight the importance of women's work and militancy for agriculture and the agroecological movement. Expanding a little more our view of Latin America, it is also possible to find a series of publications and articulations in the same direction. The agroecology journal - LEISA, in a special edition for 2020, brings together a series of analytical reports made by several women's collectives building agroecology and food and territorial sovereignty in Latin America. In Ecuador, the publication called "Women: their role in food sovereignty and security" analyzed the experiences of women with agroecology in the country, in 2017.

At the end of 2013, the Rural Women's Agroecology Institute (Iala) was created in Chile by the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (Anamuri), which brings together around 10,000 peasant and indigenous women in the country. Iala was the first institute in Latin America dedicated exclusively to women. In 2013, the Alliance of Women in Agroecology (AMA-AWA) was founded, which fights for gender equity in the different spaces of agroecology construction, such as academia, social movements and the territories where actions take place.

The Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) also has a working group on "Women, Agroecology and Solidarity Economy", which among other actions organized the publication "Agroecology in feminine: Reflections from our experiences", which brings together a series of analyzes on the agroecological practice of women from different Latin American countries.

We also highlight the alliances that have been strengthened in the political and public sphere, the relations between gender and agroecology and the agendas of indigenous women. In Brazil, a very symbolic action that indicates the approach between indigenous and peasant women was

the recent link between the First Indigenous Women's March and the Margaridas' March, both held in August 2019. The Margaridas' March has been taking place since 2000 and it is considered the largest organized action by women in Latin America and has the participation of rural women, peasant farmers and supporters from all over the country. The historical roots of the relationship between peasants and indigenous people also appear in the designations of theorists in the Latin American context.

The origin paths of these collective resistance actions in Abya Yala⁵ are part of a history of popular peasant and indigenous constructions that have traveled across the continent since the Spanish colonial occupation and the struggle for independence over 500 years ago. In the Latin American continent, collectives of peasant and indigenous women have denounced the illness of the land, territories and bodies, have been carrying out work not only of denunciation, but of sharing ways of life and political practices, of knowledge, based on their territories, community experiences, sometimes in solidarity with urban and academic women. We mention some of these collectives previously mapped in surveys carried out between 2016 and 2017: Anamuri - National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (Chile), AMISMAXAJ Association of Indigenous Women of Santa María Xalapán (Jalapa/Guatemala); Women of the Zapatista communities; Women Creating (Bolivia); Critical Views of the Territory from Feminism Collective (Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico and Uruguay); Tzk'at - Network of Ancestral Healers of Community Feminism from Iximulew (Guatemala); and the networks: Latin American Network of Defenders Women (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay) and Decolonial Feminisms Network; and the assemblies: Community Feminist Assembly of La Paz; Ch'ixi Collective (Bolivia); Assembly of Popular and Diverse Women (Ecuador).

Final thoughts

Although the scope presented here has been limited, due to the breadth of women's social praxis in Latin American territory, we seek to contribute to the understanding of the collective trajectory of women around agroecology and how it relates to broader themes and urgent issues involving agriculture, food and socio-environmental justice. We also showed that there is still a need for questioning and actions to confront inequalities and any type of gender subordination that may persist in agroecology as a science and social and political practice.

Undoubtedly, the set of possibilities for articulation between agroecology and women that we have presented in this article constitutes only a part of a much broader scenario of ongoing actions that rural women, indigenous peasants, riverside people, militant academics lead, throughout Abya Yala. Despite all the violence and challenges characteristic of articulating and resisting in geopolitically strategic territories for the reproduction of capital and its reconfigurations with neo-extractivism, patriarchy and racism. At the same time that women's social movements are strengthening, the movement for agroecology is also expanding in Latin America. This would not be possible without the alliance between women's struggles and the construction of agroecology as a horizon of critical thinking and social practices through collective actions.

What we still think is important to highlight in this closing is the plurality and, at the same time,

⁵ This is a name with indigenous origin that has been preferentially used by several indigenous peoples and movements to refer to the American continent.

the ability to converge the collective actions of women in the field of food sovereignty and agroecology in Latin America. These women, even though to a large extent continue to act outside the urban context and the most visible feminisms, have contributed to advancing proposals for sustaining life based on their political articulations and organizational capacity. What indicates the existence of multiple possibilities of paths and confluences that are formed through praxis and an axis of radical criticism of the predatory way with which we have established our human relations and with what we understand by nature. They have accomplished this historically, politically and on a daily basis, conceiving and maintaining concrete forms of confrontation and production-reproduction of life.

We conclude by emphasizing the importance of the work of organized women in agroecology and the pertinence of expanding reflections focusing on their diversity of work and forms of organization, potentialities of their praxis and the elements that contribute to analytical and conceptual criticism, contributing to rethink the relationship between agriculture, the environment and social and gender equity.
