

LAND FOR THE WOMEN WHO WORK IT

Struggles in Latin America^{*}

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There are an estimated 1.6 billion peasant women in the world, but they own only two per cent of the land.

(Photo: Randy López Abarca)

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Lack of access to land is one of the most serious problems facing rural women in Latin America and around the world—and is the cause of numerous other problems that are often “invisible” for society at large. Its consequences affect women everywhere, humanity in general and the planet.

There are an estimated 1.6 billion peasant women in the world (more than a fourth of the global population), but they own only two per cent of the land and receive only one per cent of all agricultural credit.¹ According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), in Latin America and the Caribbean, 121 million people live in rural areas—48 per cent (58 million) of whom work up to 12 hours per day caring for gardens and animals; gathering and preparing food; raising children; and caring for the sick and elderly, among other tasks. Of the 37 million rural women over the age of 15, a mere 17 million are considered part of the “economically active population” and only four million are considered “agricultural producers” (questionable statistics when one considers, for example, that women who produce commodities for the market are considered “producers”, while their productive contributions to sustaining their families and communities are left out). Nine million rural women in the region are indigenous, speak indigenous languages and are subjected to double or even triple discrimination: as women, indigenous and poor.²

Silvia Ribeiro, a researcher with the ETC Group in Mexico, has called attention to the fact that small-scale production—e.g. peasant agriculture, artisanal fishing and urban gardens—supplies the food consumed by 70 per cent of the world’s population, but controls only about 20 per cent of the land. Meanwhile, industrial agriculture takes up 80 per cent of the land and uses 80 per cent of water and fuel resources used in agriculture.³ Such figures expose the myths of the Green Revolution, which spreads the idea that agribusiness, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and massive applications of agrochemicals are the solution to the global food crisis. It is becoming increasingly apparent, however, that

peasant agriculture and women play a key role in solving hunger and sustaining and reproducing populations.

In a study on women’s access to land and property in Latin America, Magdalena León and Carmen Diana Deere show that, despite playing a fundamental role in agriculture, women own less land and less productive land.⁴ They indicate that a number of factors contribute to this, such as the privileged position of men in marriage; preference for men in matters of inheritance; preference for men in state programs for land distribution and titling; the gendered nature of the land market in which women are marginalised, etc. In other words, women work tirelessly, and they do so under conditions of profound inequality and oppression.

Patriarchy imposes a gendered division of labour and invisibilises women’s work

Researchers Isabel Larguía and John Dumoulin write that the patriarchal family is based on the division of social life:

in two completely separate spheres: the public and the domestic. Women were relegated to the domestic sphere through a gendered division of labour just as a powerful ideology was being developed that continues to determine the image of women and their role in social life to this day. Beginning with the dissolution of communitarian structures and their replacement with the patriarchal family, women’s labour became increasingly individualised and limited to the production of use value for private direct consumption. Segregated from the world of surplus value, women became embedded in the invisible economic foundations of class society. Conversely, men’s labour was defined according to different modes of production and economically visible objects destined for the creation of wealth via processes of exchange. Under

1. Rural Women’s Day, “Facts on rural women”, available at: www.rural-womens-day.org

2. Marcela Ballara and Soledad Parada, “El empleo de las mujeres rurales, lo que dicen las cifras”, Santiago de Chile: CEPAL-FAO, 2009.

3. Personal communication, May 2016

4. Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena León, *Género, propiedad y empoderamiento: tierra, Estado y mercado en América Latina*, Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2000.



Caring for gardens, animals and seeds, harvesting fruit and collecting water are unpaid tasks, considered non-productive, even though they provide food and create the conditions for the survival of millions of people. (Photo: Randy López Abarca)

capitalism—whether as owners of the means of production or as workers selling their labour power—men became defined as producers of commodities. Women, expelled from the world of surplus value production, nonetheless served an indispensable economic function. Within the new division of labour, women were assigned the task of reproducing the workforce that keeps the economy going and of transforming raw materials into use values for direct consumption. As such, women became responsible for food, clothing and general maintenance of the household, as well as educating children. This type of work, even when it was gruelling and entailed long hours, was not considered valuable. Thus, the women who performed this work were marginalised from the economy, from society and from history. The workforce is in fact the product of the housewife’s invisible labour.⁵

In the case of rural women, when we speak of invisible work we are referring to this kind of unremunerated domestic labour as well as productive work, which goes unaccounted for in national registries because it is

5. Isabel Largaía and John Dumoulin, *Hacia una ciencia de la liberación de la mujer*, Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1976.

considered an extension of biological reproduction—i.e. of the reproduction of the workforce. Caring for gardens, animals and seeds, harvesting fruit and collecting water are unpaid tasks, considered non-productive, even though they provide food and create the conditions for the survival of millions of people around the world.

The invisibilisation of the work of peasant women, based on the naturalisation of a gendered division of labour, reinforces a system in which women are not economically compensated and magnifies the difference between women and men with respect to access to land, credit and agricultural extension. This dynamic serves the interests of capital; the exploitation of the workforce; the creation of profits for oligarchies and local bourgeoisies; and processes of foreignisation and privatisation of land and all forms of life.

The proposals of popular, peasant and women’s movements

Recognising and valuing women’s work

Indigenous and peasant women have called attention to this situation and have formulated proposals to overcome it. In Brazil, the women of the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) have carried out a long process of

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debate, opening up space for their proposals through actions that shed light on the issue. María Carballo López notes: “The first demand of women within the MST was to be recognised as farmers, since in the documents their profession was listed as ‘housewife’. Their second demand was for all of them to obtain official documents, as citizens and as farmers, which they often did not possess and which impeded their ability to access land, aid, credit and their rights as workers”.⁶ The Peasant Women’s Movement of Brazil (MMC) found it necessary to carry out campaigns to demand the recognition of their specific rights. In Roxana Longo’s study of this movement, a 45-year-old member of the MMC comments: “I recall that in 1986, we organised the first caravan to Brasilia, made up of 36 women. When we arrived, the politicians said, ‘what are you doing here, if you have no profession?’ We weren’t even recognised as rural workers. So we initiated the struggle to have our profession recognised. Most of the women didn’t even have identity documents. We weren’t even recognised as citizens, which is why we started this struggle that has become stronger with each passing year”.⁷

Another interesting case is that of Bolivia, whose political process specifically proclaims the decolonisation and “de-patriarchalisation” of society as specific objectives. A report produced by the Plurinational State of Bolivia reads: “The capitalist, colonial and patriarchal system [...] sustains itself through the gendered and hierarchical division of labour and the naturalisation of reproductive and caregiving roles, defined as feminine attributes and responsibilities, such that domestic and caregiving work has not been considered [real] work. In this way, women’s economic, social and cultural contributions to the reproduction of the family have been invisibilised and devalued. This has also meant that the burden of domestic and caregiving work falls primarily on the mother of the family and/or on women in general. This has resulted in the invisibilisation of women’s reproductive and productive labour and classifying them as ‘housewives’ in the national census. However, Article 338 of the National Political Constitution states that ‘The state recognises the economic value of work in the home as a source of wealth that should be quantified in public

accounts’, thus creating a foundation for the implementation of specific actions with respect to [women’s labour].⁸ The state’s recognition of these foundational aspects of patriarchal culture—even without resolving all that this entails for women’s day to day reality—is a step forward in creating possibilities for public policies that seek genuine solutions in the medium and long term.

Valuing peasant agriculture

In the face of a global crisis that has caused the hunger of millions of people, renewed attention is being given to the value of family farming. The FAO, for instance, declared the year 2014 as the International Year of Family Farming. La Vía Campesina, despite its criticisms of FAO initiatives, decided to join the campaign in order to engage in an intense discussion of its content. In one document, the Latin American Coordination of La Vía Campesina (CLOC) stated: “There is no doubt that this FAO declaration takes place in the context of the concepts and proposals advanced by La Vía Campesina over its 20 years of struggles around the world. The FAO has returned to place its trust once again in the peasant, indigenous and family farms, the only ones capable of fighting hunger”.⁹

Ecofeminists have made similar proposals. For instance, in the book *Staying Alive: Women, ecology and survival*, Vandana Shiva writes: “Nature and women have historically been the primary food providers from

6. María Carballo López, “VEM, TEÇAMOS A NOSSA LIBERDADE. Mujeres líderes en el Movimiento Sin Tierra (Ceará-Brazil)”, PhD thesis in social and cultural anthropology, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, 2011.

7. Roxana Longo, *El protagonismo de las mujeres en los movimientos sociales. Innovaciones y desafíos. Prácticas, sentidos y representaciones sociales de mujeres que participan en Movimientos Sociales*, Buenos Aires: América Libre, 2012.

8. “Informe del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia”, available at: http://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/59/national_reviews/bolivia_review_beijing20.ashx?v=1&d=20140917T100729 (translation by GRAIN).

9. CLOC-Vía Campesina, “La CLOC-Vía Campesina en el Año Internacional de la Agricultura Familiar”, América Latina en movimiento, 14 March 2014, <http://www.alainet.org/es/active/72077>



The right to food is linked to traditional and indigenous agriculture, which is sustained by the work of women and the recovery of their knowledges. (Photo: Randy López Abarca)

natural agriculture, based on sustainable flows of fertility from the forests and livestock to croplands. The food system has always included forest and animal systems in its processes [...] The feminine principle of food production is based on the intimate relationships that exist among trees, animals and crops, and in women's work to maintain these connections. Women's work in agriculture has traditionally been a task of integrating forestry and livestock with agriculture. Agriculture modelled on nature, and based on the participation of women in nature, is self-reproducing and sustainable because internally-provided resources supply the inputs necessary for seeds, moisture, soil nutrients and pest control".¹⁰

In Zapatista communities, subsistence agriculture is part of their politics. Paragraph five of the Zapatista Women's Revolutionary Law states: "Women and children have the right to primary healthcare and nourishment". How to ensure this right to nourishment? In the framework of the *Escuelita Zapatista* ("little school"), the women of Caracol V Roberto Barrios reflect: "In terms

of nourishment, in our area we've seen that we're not far away [...] that our compañeros and compañeras must continue the customs of our ancestors, to live the way they lived, eat as they ate [...] that we shouldn't stop planting that which is ours—chayote, yuca, pumpkin..."¹¹

The right to food is linked to traditional and indigenous agriculture, which is sustained by the work of women and the recovery of their knowledges (*saberes*).

The Fifth declaration of the women's assembly of the CLOC stated: "Agriculture was created with our knowledges. Throughout history we've provided nourishment for humanity, we've created and transmitted a large part of our ancestral medicine, and currently we're the ones who produce most of the food, despite the assault on our lands and water and the many policies and programmes that persistently discriminate against and attack us. Today we demand the recognition of our contributions to production and caregiving tasks, and we propose new relations that allow us to share these burdens and responsibilities. We also reaffirm the importance of

10. Vandana Shiva, *Abrazar la vida. Mujer, ecología y supervivencia*, Instituto del Tercer Mundo, 1991. [Translation of: *Staying alive: women, ecology and development*, London: Zed Books, 1989]

11. Sylvia Marcos, "Actualidad y Cotidianidad: La Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres del EZLN", no date, https://www.vientosur.info/IMG/pdf/la_ley_revolucionaria_de_mujeresdecideci.pdf

peasant and indigenous agriculture for the wellbeing of all of humanity and the economic and environmental sustainability of the planet. Without peasant agriculture there is no food and there is no survival for the people".¹²

Guaranteeing peasant women's access to land

In the Jakarta Declaration, the women of La Vía Campesina state: "To us, the peasant and indigenous women, the land is more than a means of production. It is a space of life, culture, identity and [an] emotional and spiritual environment. Because of that, it's not a commodity, but a fundamental component of life, which is accessed by rights that are inalienable and only allocated through property and access systems defined by each people or nation. Equal access to land for men and women is a fundamental component of overcoming poverty and discrimination. The assumption that fair access to land can be achieved through market mecha-

Integral agrarian reform, food sovereignty and agroecology

Brazilian MST leader Marina Dos Santos outlines La Vía Campesina's proposal for integral agrarian reform: "It's a form of resistance to the capitalist agricultural model pushed by agribusiness and mining interests, which promotes building up our power in order to construct a new agricultural model focused on the peoples' needs"¹⁴. She goes on to summarise the pillars of popular and integral agrarian reform:

a. The democratisation of land: a guarantee that agrarian reform will not be a distribution of land without also providing access to natural resources and the products of agriculture. This includes everything that is included in that territory such as plants, forests, water, minerals, seeds and all biodiversity, prohibiting the development of corporate mining projects in the distributed lands—minerals

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nisms and individual property is far from representing the views and aspirations of indigenous and peasant women".¹³

They are thinking about different forms of land access rooted in the recognition of the historic struggles of women to guarantee a way of life that doesn't destroy the culture and identity of the people, and that doesn't accept the destruction of common goods in the pursuit of profits for agribusiness and global capitalism.

should be used sustainably for the benefit of the community and the people.

b. The organisation of agricultural production: to prioritise the production of healthy foods for the population, guaranteeing the principle of food sovereignty, free of agrochemicals and genetically modified seeds. To guarantee programmes for energy sovereignty throughout the territory based on renewable energies such as vegetable oil, solar, hydro and wind power. To organise production and commercialisation based on agricultural cooperation.

c. The development of a new paradigm for agricultural production and the distribution of wealth in agriculture: to demand government credits, research and financing for agroecology, increased

12. CLOC-Vía Campesina, "Declaración de la V Asamblea de Mujeres de la CLOC- La Vía Campesina", 15 April 2015, <https://viacampesina.org/es/index.php/temas-principales-mainmenu-27/mujeres-mainmenu-39/2382-declaracion-de-la-v-asamblea-demujeres-de-la-cloc-la-via-campesina>

13. La Vía Campesina, "Women of Vía Campesina International Manifesto", IV Women's Assembly Jakarta, June 2013, <https://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/women-mainmenu-39/1450-women-of-via-campesina-international-manifesto>

14. Marina dos Santos, "Los desafíos de la reforma agraria integral y popular", América Latina en Movimiento, 27 de marzo de 2015, <http://www.alainet.org/es/articulo/168501#!slide>



Integral agrarian reform, food sovereignty, agroecology and the defence of seeds are part of a project based on the defence and protection of common goods, of popular culture and of relations of solidarity. (Photo: Randy López Abarca)

productivity and activities that are in balance with nature. To support programmes for the production, storage and distribution of native and agroecological seeds for peasant production as part of a national food sovereignty programme. To combat intellectual property with respect to seeds, animals, natural resources, biodiversity and production systems. And to combat the production and commercialisation of genetically modified seeds and agrochemicals in all countries.

d. Industrialisation and agricultural policies: to develop small-scale agroindustries, ensuring that the added value of production generates income for peasant populations and promotes equitable development among different regions. To develop research centres, technical training and knowledge exchanges focused on [small-scale] agroindustrial activities and environmental conservation.

e. Education: Education is a fundamental right of all persons and should be available in the place where one lives, respecting basic needs and social requirements.

f. Struggles: Without a deep process of collective struggle, organisation and pressure on the part of society, it will not be possible to create a project of popular and integral agrarian reform¹⁵.

La Vía Campesina's proposal constitutes an authentic programme not only for agriculture, but also to reorient economies towards the interests of peasants and the people. In analyses carried out by women leaders in the peasant movements of Paraguay, they emphasise that integral agrarian reform must include specific proposals to ensure gender equality such as:

- The implementation of a new economic and productive model based on agroecology
- The recovery and occupation of land with the strong participation of women and youth
- Women leaders at the forefront of [land] occupations
- Land tenure for peasant producers, women and men
- Land titles in the name of women

15. *Ibid.*

“Without a deep process of collective struggle, organisation and pressure on the part of society, it will be impossible to create a project of popular and integral agrarian reform.”

- Equal access to collective and individual land titles
- Collective land tenure for cooperative projects
- New settlement models created with the leadership of women because we are “the administrators of life”
- The design of an alternative model of production with the participation of women
- Diversified production
- An agroecological model of production
- The recovery of the cultural values surrounding our food
- The marketing and exchange of food through permanent community markets
- Incentives for subsistence production
- Credit for small-scale producers and for alternative models of production
- Equal access for women and men to agricultural credits
- Agricultural insurance that covers both women and men
- The fight against large companies and for markets guaranteed by the state
- Women’s own markets where they can sell their products and ensure their own autonomy
- The creation of cooperatives and economic associations that guarantee markets at the national level
- The construction of a culture of respect and value for peasant and indigenous sectors
- Equality in the labour of peasant and indigenous women and men¹⁶
- Equality between productive and reproductive labour
- Equitable distribution of work and types of work between women and men



Illustration: Rini Templeton

Political actions

Women must be able to participate in political discussions within organisations and all spaces of power. It is important that women from diverse peasant and indigenous organisations come together in a common space to analyse and debate collective actions.

Integral agrarian reform, food sovereignty, agroecology and the defence of seeds go beyond the economic sphere—they require cultural shifts in society. These proposals question the material basis of private property, sustained through processes of expropriation, concentration and the centralisation of capital, as well as the destruction of nature and the subordination of women within processes of land distribution. They propose a re-evaluation of forms of consumption, of the relationship between urban and rural areas and of our understanding of the ancestral memory of our peoples in a way that leads to emancipation instead of destruction. This is part of a project based on the defence and protection of common goods, of popular culture, of relations of solidarity and not of exploitation of people and nature. They contribute to the creation of a feminist and socialist perspective and the decolonisation of territories and bodies. They assert that the relationship between women and land is at the heart of the reclamation of our histories, our identities and our historic struggles as women and as people.

16. “Propuestas de mujeres líderes para una reforma agraria integral con igualdad de género”, <http://www.cde.org.py/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Propuesta-de-mujeres-l%C3%ADderes-para-un-reforma-agraria-integral-cn-igualdad-de-g%C3%A9nero.pdf>



GRAIN is a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems.

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