



The rise of rural women's movements in Southern Africa

Photo: Rural Women's Assembly

Rural African women are invisible and often marginalised in formal leadership structures. By organising themselves in social movements, women in Southern Africa have amplified their voices to challenge agri-business and patriarchal oppression while advancing agroecology and building new leadership for a feminist agroecology.

By Mercia Andrews

In Africa, rural women have to struggle against corporate agribusiness and extractive industries which seek to control their land, seeds and other resources. At the same time they are also faced with different forms of patriarchal oppression and exploitation at home, in the community, in the workplace and even within social movements. While women initiatives have successfully targeted some of these issues at the local level, extending their struggle to district, national and international levels remains difficult. The Rural Women's Assembly was established to take on this challenge. Let's take a closer look at their two main struggles.

Challenging agri-business and extractive industries Global investors and transnational corporations are engaging in large-scale land acquisitions in Africa for food production, biofuels, mining and land speculation. At the same time the Alliance for the Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa and proponents of Climate Smart Agriculture are promoting a 'New Green Revolution'. This vision encourages the collaboration of governments with agri-business like Monsanto, Syngenta and other major producers and traders of GMOs. Women's demands for support for agroecology are completely ignored in favour of the seeds, pesticides and other inputs developed by Monsanto and other biochemical TNCs. The impact of this corporate-led agribusiness push is particularly severe for rural women, who complain of an increase in sexual harassment and party-political coercion by government

officials of the departments of agriculture acting on behalf of these new elites.

The Rural Women's Assembly (see box), whose members mainly use agroecological farming practices, has joined hands with other peasant and small-scale farmers in Southern Africa to contest agribusiness and the lack of support for peasant agriculture from their governments. We confront our governments' extractivist agendas and the manner in which they are allowing corporate capture of our seeds, land, forests and oceans by big capital such as agri-business and biofuel interests.

We also defy seed laws and undermine the power of TNCs when we congregate across borders to share traditional and indigenous seeds and publicly destroy GMO seeds. As guardians of traditional and indigenous seeds, rural women continue to have seed banks and share and trade their own seeds. We also resist the intrusion of the fast food market, by reviving local food systems and local food production.

Crucially, we demand usufruct rights to the land in order to produce food for the family/community, thus making it politically challenging for agri-industry and mining companies to appropriate communal land.

The struggle against patriarchy

Despite the important role of rural women in agriculture and household food security, our experience shows that traditional authorities continue to reproduce patriarchal structures. This has a major impact on women's decision-making abilities in terms of farming practices, markets and access to finance in the home, community, the church, learning institutions, the political arena, and the economy.

An example is found in the Limpopo province of South Africa where men claim that the BaPedi culture dictates that women are not supposed to lead. This is evident from the commonly used proverb "*Tsa etwa key a tshadi pele di wela leopeng*", meaning "if a leader is a woman, disaster is bound to happen". Women leadership is obstructed by traditional authorities in rural communities who expect women to be silent, hidden and respectful. These oppressive norms and cultures must be challenged. Women should be placed at the forefront to denounce poor leadership and corruption at village and ward level.

This is what we are working towards. For example, in Zimbabwe we organise to defend women who are pushed off their land when their husbands die. Esnati, from the Rural Women's Assembly in Zimbabwe, explains: "When my husband died, my in-laws evicted me from the land I worked alongside him. I was sent back to my parents with nothing, where I started to cultivate their land. For years, my work fed us and I could sell to the market. The day my parents died, my brother and the local head-man came to evict me. I was devastated and angry. I went to the local RWA group. Fifty women ac-

The Rural Women's Assembly

The Rural Women's Assembly emerged in 2009 out of the World Social Forum's People Dialogue which sought to create opportunities for activists to learn from the struggles that defend territories and the commons.

Afterwards, the Rural Women's Assembly organised itself across Southern Africa, establishing autonomous, country level platforms, electing their own leadership structures and developing their own guidelines and principles for the movements. Currently the RWA exists in nine countries: South Africa, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, Mauritius and we have just started in Angola.

panied me back to the homestead and together we insisted that I will stay on the land and in the house. We occupied the land daily for over 20 days fighting off the local men.” Finally, Esnati was allowed to stay on the land, paving the way for other women in her situation.

Amplifying the organising capacities of women A critical challenge is that women are not valued as leaders. This is why we are creating powerful local associations, farmers’ groups, saving clubs, health committees and church-based women’s organisations led by rural women. The existence of these local formations show that rural women have the skills, ability, experience and knowledge required to lead.

This is very important because women are often made invisible in wider movements despite having played key roles in them, for example the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya that mobilised thousands of women against logging, and the Niger Delta Women’s Movement resistance against oil drilling. There are hundreds of other important women-led initiatives across Africa: Women have challenged slavery, colonialism, apartheid and fought in the wars of liberation. Therefore it is essential to probe the unexplored areas of African women’s leadership, their protests, activism and campaigns so that their voices and leadership can be heard and amplified more completely.

We have various strategies to strengthen the leadership of women. At a regional level in Southern Africa, we regularly organise a feminist school, leadership sessions and a young women social media training camp where ideas of feminism, feminist leadership and power relations are strengthened and developed. Examples of popular resistance and grassroots women’s activism are integrated into these trainings. At the national level in various countries, we challenge the dominant male-centred, hierarchical, directive-oriented, centralised organisations and decision making, including within farmer movements. For example, in 2018, the RWA challenged the elections of the Namibian Small-Scale Farmers Union with its predominantly male leadership. This successfully led to women being elected into the union’s leadership structures.

Towards feminist leadership in African agriculture In the past years, we have learned a lot. Important questions for us are: how can we create different, non-hierarchical organisational forms and ways of leading? Leadership for what? To change what? For us, leadership is a means and not an end in itself. It has to be rooted in the values of the movement and an understanding of the change that we have to make in the lives of women. This implies deconstructing the concept of leadership, especially



We must make sure that women and their practices are no longer made invisible, ignored or erased from memory. Photo: AFSA

feminist leadership. Experiments are needed with collective leadership, flat structures and greater autonomy at the village and country level, to “create the road as we walk it”. Within the RWA, we are already building a praxis of action-reflection, of combining strategies and being open to learning. We aim to create spaces that are open and safe for women. Popular education, reading together and story-telling are used as part of our movement building strategies.

We have learned that to build women movements we have to recognise that in the past and present, and across our lands and our communities, strong women’s collective mobilisations already exist. In order to strengthen agroecology, rather than focusing on the scaling of a particular farming practice, we must make the voices of women our point of departure, engage in their struggles and foster their mobilisation on the basis of horizontality. This involves promoting feminist leadership and making sure that women and their practices are no longer made invisible, ignored or erased from memory. By doing so we can activate the full force of women to challenge agri-business, dismantle patriarchal structures and advance a feminist agroecology.

Mercia Andrews is a feminist activist based in South Africa, and is the regional coordinator of the Rural Women’s Assembly. This article builds on ‘A case study of the Southern African Rural Women’s Assembly: We can break the bend’, published in *Agenda* (2019). Contact: mercia@tcoe.org.za