

# Care ethics in agroecology research: practices from southern Mexico

In Chiapas, Mexico, scholars and students are seeking to 'territorialise' the university using indigenous and feminist principles of care. The university has become not only a place that generates cognitive knowledge but also a place that nourishes experience and meaningful connection. This experience shows how a feminist ethics of care can guide the formation of new, agroecological ways of organising.

By Diana Lilia Trevilla Espinal  
and Ivett Peña Azcona

**F**irst of all we would like to situate and name ourselves: we are women with Afro-descendant and Indigenous roots. We speak from Chiapas and Oaxaca, where we are weaving experiences and dialogues with women from different places and generations, particularly peasants, Indigenous, Black and migrant people. We participate in networks such as the Alliance of Women in Agroecology (AMA-AWA) and the Network of Creators, Researchers and Social Activists. The first is a collective where over 50 female students, researchers, members of social organisations, feminists and agroecologists from Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States and Europe, come together. The second is made up of young women from Mexico.

From our perspective, which is shared by the great Indigenous and peasant movements in the Global South, food sovereignty starts with the defense of the territory and of those who inhabit it: people, fauna, flora and the commons, which includes seeds, water and forests. We also share the perspective of women in Latin America, who emphasise the importance of making territories free from violence against their bodies and of building communities without discrimination, exclusion, dispossession and impoverishment. As women from these territories, we continue to nurture these perspectives.

**Feeling-thinking with the territory** Currently, rural areas are disputed territories due to the competing interests of agri-industry, which considers people, land, and food as commodities with which to generate short-term

surpluses and profits. Large companies and international organisations are pressuring for reforms that promote the use of technological packages offered by agroindustry. They also pressure governments to implement large, extractive projects. Women and feminists from Latin America are engaged in struggles against megaprojects and industrial agriculture to defend peasant agriculture and preserve the commons. Their practices and analyses inspire us to contribute to what we consider four fundamental aspects of a feminist understanding of food sovereignty:

1. Food sovereignty as situated in territory-body-earth: This means that we are bodies rooted in territories. Therefore, what happens in our bodies affects the territories and vice versa.
2. Feeling as a constituent of knowledge building: This implies valuing the affects, emotions and human relationships with nature that are present in all the processes that shape territory-body-earth.
3. The recognition that indigenous, peasant, coloured and Afro-descendant women contribute to the theory, politics, economy and defense of the territory.
4. The acknowledgement that care work, which involves the affective, psychic, relational and physical work needed for life, is indispensable in creating the conditions for agroecology and food sovereignty.

From this perspective, we share an experience in Chiapas on how we are territorialising food sovereignty through feminist practices.

**An ethics of care and the academy** We noted that an ethics of care lies at the heart of feminist food sovereignty practices. A feminist ethics of care recognises that we are not productive beings, we are beings who reproduce life, therefore, we need and can give care. This must be done in reciprocity, which in turn requires conditions that allow care to be a common, collective practice that is distributed fairly among all gender/sexual identities and generations. Care work refers to all the work that is done to preserve and regenerate life, not only concerning children, family or community members but also animals, plants and territory. Care work is often unpaid and done by women, who frequently have to combine it with paid jobs. An ethics of care can help change this.

We should not forget that what today is called agroecology is based on the millenia-old knowledge of indigenous peoples and peasants. While research has been important in generating insights on agroecology, the academy often continues to be a predominantly masculine and colonial domain focused on the production of abstract knowledge rather than fostering

## Academia is predominantly masculine and colonial and not focused on relations of care.

relations of care. In the South of Mexico, people are taking an alternative approach. The Aula-Huerto or classroom-garden is a space of experience and interaction, located in the research center of *El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (Ecosur)*, in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Founded in 2008, it is part of a wider pedagogical initiative that seeks to scale agroecology by strengthening communities around health, conservation and food through the exchange of knowledge and experiences.

**The Aula-Huerto** The Aula-Huerto consists of three spaces. There is a classroom-kitchen-laboratory called “*El frijolón*” where people in the scholar’s community can share healthy, locally produced food. It also has a greenhouse, where seeds are dried and

Workshop on health and nutrition at the Aula Huerto. Photo: Ivett Peña Azcona



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germinating plants are nourished, an area where plant residues are composted and a 'semilloteca' where seeds are stored for later exchange. Finally, Aula-Huerto has a large garden that runs across the university where more than 36 different species of vegetables, aromatic plants, flowers and 'milpa' (beans, squash, chile, quelites and corn) are cultivated in beds and vertical gardens.

The Aula-Huerto has the potential to build on an ethics of care. It developed through an organic process of self-organisation and collective management, mainly done on a voluntary basis by a group of researchers, as well as technical staff, administrators and students. The participation and leadership of women, who make up 80% of the people involved, is key. Group members perform managerial and administrative tasks but also engage in care work, which includes watering plants, making compost, sowing, harvesting and safeguarding seeds.

There is still no internal or external policy that supports the initiative, except that it has now been incorporated into the institutional environmental plan. In practice, the strategy to sustain it is based on networks and collective action; for example, the Aula-Huerto has alliances with other groups such as the Chiapaneca Network of Educational Gardens, the Mexican Network of Educational Gardens and the International Network of Educational Gardens.

Next to caring for nature, the Aula-Huerto is also a place where food, seeds and knowledge are exchanged between people from inside and outside the academic community, serving to blur the boundaries between the two worlds. Every Friday the garden turns into an agroecological market, where local producers come to

sell their products and engage in conversations with university researchers, students and staff. This creates direct relationships with consumers. Indigenous seed varieties are presented and exchanged. In the Aula-Huerto, peasant groups, primary and secondary schools, universities and social organisations and movements, come together to share agroecological experiences. Visitors come from within the country, as well as other countries such as Cuba, Brazil, Chile, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Venezuela, India and the United States.

The value of the Aula-Huerto is increasingly recognised by formal education institutes outside the research center. Various diploma courses on educational gardening for primary and secondary school teachers were hosted in the Aula-Huerto, as well as over 26 agroecology workshops and various conferences, such as the First Mexican Congress of Agroecology in 2019. In this way, practices are disseminated, experiences are shared and other agroecological processes are strengthened. Collectively, we are building the Aula-Huerto on a feminist ethics of care, based on the ideas of ploughing the path, sharing the harvest, thanking mother earth and sustainability.

**Ploughing the path** At the heart of these efforts lies a collective process that brings together different knowledge and generations. Strengthening the social fabric of our community and promoting collective ownership and responsibility are as important as the results of particular activities. The starting point is that in order to learn about agroecology, feeling and thinking together with others is central. This implies a challenge to recreate and to *territorial-*

**Cooking workshop, mandala garden and agroecological debate at the Aula-Huerto.**

Photos: Ivett Peña Azcona



ise agroecology beyond academic spaces, aiming for an agroecology that is not only shaped by research, but also by communities, by creating space for all within and outside academia to come together.

**Sharing the harvest** This is something we have learned from indigenous peoples. For them, *sharing the harvest* is a communal, ethical principle. In the Aula-Huerto this takes shape in the distribution of the work and time put into the care of its spaces. Everyone's involvement is encouraged, so the responsibility and work do not fall exclusively on women. Through this principle, gender relations and roles are transcended. The harvest is also shared through the involvement of local communities in different activities, which includes the literal distribution of the seeds, vegetables, and medicinal plants harvested. A concrete example is how during the current COVID-19 crisis, the Aula-Huerto group is collaborating with organised civil society to deliver medicinal plants and seeds in agroecological food baskets to vulnerable families.

**Thanking Mother Earth** Traditional ceremonies to thank Mother Earth come from indigenous and peasant peoples around Latin America and the Caribbean. In the seminars, workshops, encounters and meetings in the Aula-Huerto, this principle is taken forward in different ways, for example, through opening *mística* ceremonies; by expressing the appreciation for the work of those who collaborate; or by sharing food among the participants.

Thanking Mother Earth means valuing agroecology - not only as a productive practice, but also in terms of nourishing co-existence, recreation, art, relaxation and enjoyment, solidarity and community. Other examples of how these values are incorporated in the Aula-Huerto practices include yoga in the garden, painting, drawing and photography workshops and playing games, for example to learn about pest and pollinator management. We also organise talks about health and nourishment, events where people cook, and workshops on how to process garden produce into ointments, essential oils, tinctures, preserved foods and ferments.

**Sustainability, justice and dignity** Agroecology as an alternative to the agro-industrial system, and a tool for food sovereignty, also means addressing socio-environmental conflicts. This implies challenging daily practices in which land, common goods and people are exploited for profit. A feminist ethics of care is an important strategy to guide the formation of new, agroecological ways of organising based on principles of sustainability, justice, dignity and collectivity.

## We must value agroecology as food production, co-existence, recreation, art, solidarity and community.

In the Aula-Huerto we promote critical thinking, as well as the politicisation of these issues in the closest everyday relationships. We talk about the importance of both recognising the role of women in agroecology and promoting actions that ensure that their opinions and proposals are heard. This involves reflecting on whether women receive fair wages and whether care work in families is fairly distributed. There are still challenges ahead of us. One is creating protocols in the committee and research center to advance an institutional culture without violence and based on ethical principles of care.

Changing the wider institutional environment remains a big challenge, for us in Aula-Huerto but also for the broader agroecology movement. Within households, organisations, academia and social movements, we need to work towards not only an equitable and non-binary redistribution of the tasks, but also address more fundamental issues to break patriarchal forms of oppression. This requires the full participation, commitment and involvement of all genders and sexual identities. It also requires bottom-up public policies, regulatory changes, budget allocation to sustain local initiatives and other actions that seek to overcome inequalities and that promote a sustainable life.

Through our experience with the Aula-Huerto ECOSUR, we are convinced that to scale agroecology we must build on a feminist ethics of care. This goal will not be possible if we do not re-examine the unequal relationships that continue to exist inside and outside our communities, and without valuing the importance of care work in the broadest sense. This includes caring for people, relationships, food systems, the community and the territories.

Diana Lilia Trevilla Espinal and Ivett Peña Azcona are active members of the Aula-Huerto and scholars in agroecology at ECOSUR, Mexico. Contact: [diana.trevilla@gmail.com](mailto:diana.trevilla@gmail.com)