

Harvesting the liberation of peasant women in Brazil

In Brazil, society is governed by patriarchal, racist and capitalist social relations that subordinate women, especially rural women, and deem them inferior. The situation is more pronounced for Black women, who must also struggle against the enduring legacy of slavery and the racial inequalities that are still embedded in society today. By coming together to reflect on their realities and engage in collective action, Black women in Brazil are challenging the systems that exploit them while actively constructing agroecological alternatives. The struggle for economic autonomy and supportive public policies is an example of what peasant women from the Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (MMC - Movement of Peasant Women) in the state of Bahia, Brazil have coined *Popular Peasant Feminism*.

Fighting for women's rights Bahia is the largest state in the north-eastern part of Brazil. It is predominantly Black and home to diverse cultures. It also has a long history of struggle against racism and for liberation and the peasantry, as it hosts the largest number of smallholdings in Brazil.

However, until 1988, peasant women were discriminated against and excluded, both socially and politically. The state did not recognise them as rural workers, meaning they possessed no formal labour rights. As a consequence, women were not allowed to join rural workers unions, denying them a platform through which to articulate their demands.

To change these conditions, peasant women have engaged in a long struggle in pursuit of their rights. In 1982, women from across the state started to come

By organising in a movement for 'popular peasant feminism', women in Bahia, Brazil, have strengthened farming practices that enhance their economic autonomy and successfully pushed for policies that recognise and support their work. This experience demonstrates how women can shape organisational and political processes and be the protagonists of solutions to their common challenges.

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together to reflect on their conditions and their daily reality. They also began to formulate proposals to improve their situation, and strengthened their agroecological farming practices as a pathway to greater autonomy and independence. Little by little they aligned in a national level movement. In 2004, together with movements from 16 other Brazilian states, they founded the national Movement of Peasant Women (MMC), which is currently present in 30 municipalities in Bahia.

To this day, the MMC has fought for the recognition of peasant women as rural workers, as well as their right to social security services. This led to changes in the federal constitution in 1988 where these rights were granted (although various rights are at risk of being dismantled again today). While this was a major win, the battle was not over. For example, the Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar (PRONAF - National Policy to Strengthen Family Farming) adopted in 1995, which amongst other things provides credit to family farmers, did not have a section focused on women.

Since 2007, the MMC has been running a national campaign on healthy food production that is part of their project to promote agroecological and feminist peasant farming. The experiences of peasant women,

and the challenges they present to agribusiness and to patriarchy, formed the starting point. The initiative denounces the negative effects of agribusiness on the environment and proposes the construction of food sovereignty as an alternative means to nourish the country. A cornerstone of the campaign is that women's work in producing food must be valorised and that women should be recognised as citizens with rights and as protagonists in the construction of agroecology.

The re-discovery of the home garden As part of this national campaign, in Bahia women engage in various exchanges and training/formation programmes on agroecology, feminism and public policies centred around peasant agriculture. This process of knowledge exchange enables women to adopt and adapt appropriate agroecological practices. At the same time, by reflecting on and analysing their day-to-day realities, the injustices caused by patriarchy, capitalism and racism come to the fore.

For example, from their reflections and actions, peasant women realised that a significant part of their production came from the home garden. While home gardens have a historical significance in securing food

Harvesting beetroot at Fazenda Cigano, Riacho de Santana - Bahia, Brazil. Photo: Henrique Sousa Silva



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for peasant families, society did not value them because they fall under the domain of women. But through their conversations and their collective work, women realised that their gardens are not only places where they can produce healthy foods, but also where they can maintain and spread cultural and ancestral knowledge and practices.

Besides hosting a large diversity of vegetables, an orchard, medicinal plants, small animals and flowers, the home garden is a place where people engage in conversation and where children play. As such, the home gardens formed the starting point for women to organise themselves politically (understanding how to change their reality), productively (agroecology) and economically (by creating markets), to enhance their position, income and autonomy.

Strengthening peasant women's systems of production

This built on work that had been ongoing since 1982. While peasant women in Bahia were well organised politically, they also needed to generate their own income and enhance their economic autonomy. In response 25 groups that together encompass over 800 peasant women joined forces to strengthen their production systems and markets. Together women began to improve their agroecological practices and commercialise their own produce.

An important agroecological practice was the use of water cisterns. North Eastern Brazil is very dry and the cisterns, distributed from 2003 onwards through the One Million Rural Cisterns Program (PIMC), allow peasants to harvest rainwater during the rainy season. The availability of water turned out to be a key turning point for agroecology, facilitating peasant livelihoods and allowing them to increase the agroecological pro-

Making raw sugar from cane juice in Comunidade Santaninha, Riacho de Santana - Bahia, Brazil.

Photo: Déborah Murielle S. Santos



duction of healthy foods. The introduction of the cisterns had a particularly profound impact for women, given that they are typically the ones responsible for fetching water for their homes and gardens.

This brought diverse benefits, women saw their economic position improve and their families and communities gained access to healthy foods. Prior to selling the food they produce, the women evaluate whether it is better used to nourish their own families. At the home garden they produce a diversity of products, including pumpkin, sugarcane, various bean types, tomatoes, lettuce, cumin, carrots, sweet potatoes, okra, onions, water melon, mango, guava, banana and beetroot. The

Strong peasant organisations are needed that can fight against set-backs and re-conquer public policies.

women also cultivate an immense variety of medicinal plants and animal feed, including sorghum, grass and forage palm. Prioritising food to feed the family has helped bring healthier diets to the communities.

With the 2007 campaign, the women groups started to professionalise. In some municipalities, processing was moved from home kitchens to professional structures and equipment was bought that enabled them to produce at larger scales. As a result the groups increasingly sold not just fresh crops but also sweets, cakes, cookies, flowers and dishes that are typical of the Brazilian semi-arid region.

Importantly, by organising production and distribution in a more solidary manner, the women were able to access the new institutional markets that were created by the government's National School Feeding Programme (PNAE) and the Food Acquisition Programme (PAA). They started to sell to schools, hospitals and other public institutions in the region. This supported peasant women in making their own decisions and in becoming aware of what they produce and who they produce for. It was a pleasure for them to know their food was nourishing children in the city.

The process of training/formation and organisation in the movement and the development of skills in production and commercialisation increased women's confidence in generating income from their own gardens. In this way, the peasant women have constructed a feminist

agroecological praxis that seeks dialogue between different forms of knowledge and transforms reality, starting from a reflection on concrete experiences.

Impact: diversity, autonomy and freedom from violence

The experiences generated by the organisational processes of peasant women and the appreciation of women's work, were key in enhancing the autonomy of peasant women. This is demonstrated by an increase in crop diversity in the gardens. It is through the amplification of women groups that women were able to produce more in terms of quantity and diversity. Building on the productive capacity of the home garden also contributed to enhancing food sovereignty, starting within their own homes and expanding to popular restaurants, schools and other public places.

These developments have also served to reformulate household relationships: women have come to be more valued and respected by their own partners, children and by themselves. For many women it was the first time that they were making their own money and felt able to decide how to spend it. With greater incomes, women were able to improve their conditions as domestic workers at home. For example, purchasing appliances such as a washing machine afforded them more free time. Many also returned to school to finish their studies, with some acquiring positions and status at universities. These shifts have allowed peasant women to confront or distance themselves from instances of domestic violence, and work towards bringing an end to violence within the family.

By politically organising themselves in the Movement of Peasant Women, the women groups shifted from being isolated experiences to being connected at community, municipal, state and national levels. As such, women became agents of change that motivate (and are motivated by) other women in different parts of the country.

To peasant women the home gardens are "small" experiences that become large and exemplary when united with others for the construction of food sovereignty and the transformation of entire production systems.

Lessons learnt This experience shows that public policies, such as those that support the establishment of institutional markets, are important for peasant women to construct food sovereignty, reverse hunger and enhance their financial autonomy. By engaging in organisational and political processes, women became the protagonists of solutions to their common problems, and helped to develop policies that recognise the work of women and enhance their autonomy.

However, the experience also shows that public policies and programmes are vulnerable to political

change. Since 2016, public policies in Brazil, particularly those that support the poorest, are being dismantled. This reflects the conjunction of crises (economic, environmental, political and social) that led to Jair Bolsonaro's election. An administration led by neo-fascists and extreme neo-liberals.

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This year, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic, various peoples' organisations from the countryside, forest, and waters drafted a Law designed to strengthen the production and distribution of healthy food to fight against the return of hunger aggravated by the pandemic. The Assis de Carvalho Law (Law No14.048) was approved by the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate with a large majority. But president Bolsonaro rejected this law, vetoing practically any proposal that fights hunger.

This points at the importance of having strong peasant organisations with a political agenda, that can fight against set-backs and re-conquer public policies that serve to improve life in the countryside and in the city when they are under threat.

In summary, this experience highlights agroecology not only as a technique or way of producing food, but also as a form of political engagement. An agroecology without feminism, anti-racism and an organised peasantry risks co-optation and being undermined by the very powers that agroecology seeks to challenge. The greatest lesson we learn from the women of the MMC is that without the political organisation of peasant women, agroecology is not possible.

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