



THE NOTES OF SUD

Gender Equality in Access to Land: a priority condition for sustainable agriculture

Women play a key role in agriculture and food security throughout the world. But prevailing patriarchal norms make the significance of their work invisible and marginalize them in access to land. The difficulties women face in obtaining this access is further exacerbated by the processes of land concentration, which is caused by expansion in capitalist exploitation of natural resources.



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1 THE INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

According to FAO, women account for 43% of the world's agricultural labor force. In family production units, gendered division of labor is often clearly defined and is the basis of assigning different types of crops and plots, tasks, and

responsibilities within the household. For example, in many regions, it is the men who manage the cash crops and the women who produce subsistence food for self-consumption. In this way, women play a key role in food security. They are estimated to produce between 60 and 80% of food in the countries of the South and half of food in the entire world.¹ >>>

1. FAO, 2011, quoted by SOS Faim in *Dajaloo* No. 40: www.sosfaim.be/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/sosfaim-dajaloo-40-light.pdf

In addition to the time they devote to agricultural work—and this is one of the specific features of their patriarchal condition—women also manage the overwhelming majority of domestic and parental tasks. Together with the share of work required for agricultural production that helps cover the needs of raising new generations (in terms of food, clothing, medical care, education, etc.), these tasks make up what is known as “reproductive work.” But its value is not recognized, and consequently is not remunerated. In most countries, it is also women who are responsible for gathering firewood and water for the family’s needs. When this reproductive work is taken into account, it ensues that the working time of women is greater than that of men. But despite their vital role in family productive systems and for society, women-specific tasks are often dismissed as “assistance” and suffer from a lack of acknowledgment.

In many countries of the South, the scale of male migration is leading to the feminization of agriculture. Indeed, women are taking on an increasing role in agricultural and food production, including that intended for sale. In some villages in Niger, for example, 45% of households are headed by a woman because of the large male exodus.² However, this feminization has not led to greater security of access to land or to greater influence in land governance for women farmers. Patriarchal ways of thinking continue to predominate, and despite their distance men maintain control over means of production.

PATRIARCHY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

A “patriarchy” is a system of society in which men have an established primacy of power over women. “Male domination” is practiced in various forms in the family and professional sphere, as well as in the public space. It is institutionalized by local traditions and by national political and legal systems.

Although patriarchy is characteristic of most societies, it is not a law of nature. In fact, in humanity’s past, gender equality may have even been a much more common feature.

As patriarchy is a historical construction, there’s nothing immutable about it. We can challenge the types of oppression on which patriarchy is based, and in doing so challenge patriarchy itself.

The process of the feminization of agriculture therefore raises all the more acutely the question of women’s access to productive resources, and in particular land. Practically everywhere around the world, land governance—regardless of how diverse its forms—is systematically more favorable to men than to women. Women farmers are generally granted less fertile and accessible land, and in most cases their land rights are insecure. These rights are moreover indirect, because they derive from rights attributed exclusively to men, who allow women to benefit from them secondarily. They are limited, because they are often rights to only part of the resources (gathering or grazing, etc.). And they are temporary, because in most cases women have neither the right to transfer the rights to others, nor the guarantee of being able to benefit from them from one year to the next.

Similarly, in the vast majority of cases, women cannot inherit the land of their parents or husbands. Furthermore, women are more often than not excluded from having control over land. They have no say in the processes of allocating land, or in defining the rules for the use of land and natural resources. The under-representation of women in both customary and official decision-making bodies at the local and national levels is a real obstacle to change in societal frameworks that affect land tenure.

2 WOMEN SUFFER THE DUAL HARDSHIP OF LAND CONCENTRATION BY CAPITALIST FARMS AND “TRADITIONAL” DISCRIMINATION

The past decade has seen an acceleration in the process of land concentration, with fewer and fewer production units benefiting from it. It has involved holders of massive amounts of capital turning away from the sectors hit by the 2007-2008 financial crisis and investing in the primary agricultural and food sector. The phenomenon of large-scale land acquisitions—combined with the effects of urbanization, population growth, and climate change—is a serious threat to the lives of many rural people.³ Under these circumstances, women, whose rights are already less protected, are more likely to be sidelined in access to land.

This is all the more true when agro-industrial projects attempt to take over natural spaces used as “commons” by the inhabitants of a territory, especially by women who gather various resources there (water, wood, fruit, etc.).⁴ In Cameroon, for example, the oil palm plantations of the Socapalm company eliminated wild palm trees, whose fruit women had harvested for multiple uses.⁵

2. Hélène Guéat-Bernard, *Féminin-Masculin, Genre et agricultures familiales*, Quae, 2014.

3. Coordination SUD, *C2A Notes No. 3*, “Land Grabbing, a Threat to Food Security”, October 2010: www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/C2A-Notes-n%C2%B03-Land-grabbing-a-threat-to-food-security.pdf

4. Kristina Lanz, *Vers une nouvelle tragédie des terres communes ? Accaparement des terres et leurs effets sur l'accès des femmes aux ressources des terres communes*, GREP/Pour, 2014/2 No. 222. Article available online at: www.cairn.info/revue-pour-2014-2-page-249.htm

5. See the women’s open letter to Socapalm: www.farmlandgrab.org/post/view/28888

AGRICULTURAL MODERNIZATION AND THE DISCREDITING OF WOMEN'S WORK IN FRANCE⁶

The French Agricultural Guidance Act of 1960-1962 led to the introduction in the Rural Code of a farm model with a two-person team. This model was conceived as a husband-and-wife farm headed by a "head farmer."

For H  l  ne Gu  tat-Bernard, a researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) who studies gender relations in agriculture in various regions of the world, the modernization promoted at that time "revolved around and was based on patriarchal working relations within the family."

The law enshrined the role generally accorded to women in rural families at the time by designating them as "family assistants." The husband, on the other hand, was designated as the "head farmer."

// The fight against land grabbing is inevitably a challenge in common for men and women. //

Women are also affected indirectly when the areas usually allocated to them for community food production, such as bottom lands, are taken over by men who have suffered land grabbing by big companies. Thus, when it comes to the global trend of land grabbing by the holders of capital, women are victims twice over: firstly as members of peasant communities in great danger from these processes, and secondly as individuals whose status is held in disdain by most rural societies.

It seems important to stress here that the situations of women, although specific, inevitably interact with those of men. For this reason, we cannot expect women's land rights to be secured if those of smallholder farmers as a whole are not either. We must bear in mind that the fight against land grabbing is inevitably a challenge in common for men and women.

3 INITIATIVES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Women's rights are set forth in many international agreements and covenants that call for equal rights between women and men, including correcting inequalities in land rights.⁷ These are powerful reference documents for legitimizing local demands to improve women's access to land. But this international human right is not justiciable at the supranational level. That is why the world's largest peasant movement (Via Campesina) is conducting a campaign for the creation of a World Tribunal to remedy this.⁸

Many initiatives by civil society organizations are conducting information, training, and awareness-raising activities on land governance and women's land rights. Lack of education and of access to information is indeed a big problem: it prevents women from overcoming the obstacles they face in access to and control of land, and from asserting their rights. To remedy this, workshops can be established to help women become aware of the land rights guaranteed to them by legislative frameworks, of what prevent them from exercising those rights, and of the mechanisms and systems that exist for asserting them. While there should be awareness-raising activities specifically aimed at women so that they can acquire more knowledge and confidence, awareness-raising must also target men and local authorities. Indeed, it is important for everyone to understand that improving women's access to land is beneficial to the community as a whole.

Many rural women's movements and organizations are involved in changing the balance of power between women and men. To achieve equal citizenship between men and women, political affirmation plays a more important role than outside assistance. Collective actions have been undertaken by women at the local level to obtain improved access to land and power over land management and over governance of rural organizations (e.g. unions or cooperatives... whose services often require access to land⁹). While women are still a minority in peasant organizations and are often limited to subordinate roles, more and more of them are raising the question of gender inequality internally and organizing themselves collectively to take their rightful place as rural workers. This is reflected in the recent statement issued by the ROPPA¹⁰ women's panel (coll  ge des femmes):

"Our organizations must allow us to participate in the life of the great West African peasant movement and to defend our specific positions, proposals and demands. Within the framework of ROPPA and the national platforms of PO members, we have taken this path since the meeting in Kanilai, Gambia, in 2003, which resulted in the creation of the Regional Panel

6. H  l  ne Gu  tat-Bernard, *Travail des femmes et rapport de genre dans les agricultures familiales : analyse des similitudes entre la France et le Cameroun*, Armand Colin, the review *Tiers Monde*, 2015/1 no. 221. Article available online at: www.cairn.info/revue-tiers-monde-2015-1.htm

7. Rights and Resources, *Summary: Using International Law to Advance Women's Tenure Rights in REDD+*, October 2015.

8. www.stopcorporateimpunity.org/call-to-international-action/

9. Coordination SUD, *Les Notes de SUD no. 28*, « Gender and Agricultural Export Value Chains: the strengths, limitations and lessons of fair trade », 2021.

10. R  seaux des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs d'Afrique de l'Ouest (Network of Farmers Organizations and Agricultural Producers of West Africa).

of Women in 2005, based on the National Panels, in order to 'contribute to strengthening the representation of rural women in decision-making and governance bodies at all levels of the network and to their socioeconomic and political and legal empowerment within the family, community and village.'¹¹

Some initiatives take on the scope of global social and political movements. For example, the international

peasant movement Via Campesina¹² has had a Women's Commission since 1996 to promote networking and gatherings among the various organizations of rural women. These alliances are important for creating synergies and exchanges on the obstacles women encounter in access to land, as well as on the initiatives put into practice to overcome them. ●

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE LANDLESS WORKERS' MOVEMENT (MST) OF BRAZIL

The Landless Workers' Movement was formed in Brazil in 1984. This peasant organization fights for agrarian reform and among other actions carries out land occupations throughout the country. As early as its first National Congress, women came together to create a women's movement within MST. In the early 1990s, women decided to self-train in order to equip themselves with practical and theoretical tools, both to support their vital demand that gender issues be taken into account in the MST project and to make specific proposals along those lines. The National Women's

Collective was created, which then became the National Gender Collective. Little by little, landless women acquired new knowledge and emerged as a real political force within MST. In the 1990s, women from MST participated in several national, subregional, and international meetings, especially with Via Campesina. Ties and alliances were forged with other rural women's movements around the world. This helped enhance women's capacity of action within MST and heighten awareness of the key political role women have to play in the fight for land.¹³

11. Declaration by rural women members of the women's panel of the CNCR and ROPPA: www.roppa-afrique.org/IMG/pdf/declaration_femme_rurale_1_.pdf

12. <https://viacampesina.org/en/>

13. Galgani Silveira Leite Esmeraldo, *Femmes en mouvement: la naissance d'une existence sociale, politique et professionnelle*, Hélène Guétat-Bernard éd., *Féminin-Masculin, Genre et agriculture familiales*, Quæ éditions, 2014.



This publication has been produced by the Agriculture and Food Commission (C2A) of Coordination SUD. As part of its mission to support the collective advocacy work of its members, Coordination SUD has set up working committees. The Agriculture and Food Commission (C2A) brings together international solidarity NGOs working to achieve the right to food and to strengthen support for family farming in policies that impact world food security:

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C2A publications are produced with the support of the AFD. The viewpoints expressed in this document in no way represent the official point of view of the AFD.

