

Rural women's empowerment at the global level

From rural grassroots women movements to the institutionalisation of women's empowerment for the benefit of the agriculture industry development

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Abstract: Grassroots rural women movements are involved in supporting alternative development models based on agroecology and food sovereignty throughout the world. These political movements are claiming women's empowerment, women's rights and global justice. The institutionalisation of women's empowerment by the largest institutional organizations is a top down strategy to engage more and more women in the agriculture business. They intend merely to increase women's agricultural productivity. Clearly this development strategy has little to do with empowerment but is rather a shift toward the depoliticization of women's grassroots movements. This short paper is based upon a broad literature review on rural women's movements and their fights.

Key words: women's empowerment, politics, development, agroecology, food sovereignty

Introduction: empowerment is a political concept

We cannot understand the meaning of empowerment if we cannot define what power is. Power and empowerment are both political concepts. According to this perspective, a multifaceted approach of power is mobilized to grasp the women's empowerment process described by Joanna Rowlands (1997). She identified many forms of power and among these: the « *power from within* » (i.e.: positive self image), the « *power to* » (i.e. develop knowledge, know-how, and know-how-to-be), the « *power with* » (i.e. social power to produce changes within different spheres of the society) and the « *power over* » (i.e. power of an individual over someone else or over an institution). We develop a discussion on what women's empowerment means through a literature review on rural women's movements and their fights. Empowerment is a dynamic process able to produce important changes at different levels : individual, collective and even structural. Based on these different kinds of power it is possible to identify the multiple dimensions of women politicisation. There is a raising awareness of women about their position in the structures of power and domination. The collective level analysis highlights the process of identification and participation that articulates with the feeling of belonging to a social and political group. The objective dimension is expressed through the ability to negotiate and to redesign the gendered roles in various areas. South radical feminist discourse, in the 80's, introduced the concept of empowerment in the international development area and especially for poor rural women working in agriculture in developing countries. Empowerment is deliberately a politics that cannot be resumed as a claim for an economical autonomization to meet women and poor people basic needs. Women constitute 43% of the agricultural workforce even if their work is both invisible and unpaid as they are not considered as « workers ». Under the neoliberal order women in developing countries are dispossessed from their lands, skills and knowledge about planting nutritious traditional crops. Women are central in homegardens agriculture, forestry, food and cooking for daily subsistence. This dispossession of women and their involvement in export agriculture commodities for low wages increase the food insecurity of their households while globalizing the food regime.

The politics and strategies of rural grassroots women movements

An alternative of the agricultural industry which excludes rural women for cash crops production is the organization of self-help groups of rural women as appeared in the 80's in Brazil. This movement called MMTR for Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais (rural women workers movement) convinced rural men to fight along with women activists against land grabbing resulting in the re-emergence of rural commons for agroecology, food sovereignty and global justice (Prévost, 2019). International women's movements as The World March of Women and La Via Campesina (LVC) claim for gender equality in order to promote agroecology, food sovereignty and to get the World Trade Organization out of agriculture. Since 1993, LVC, in more than 70 countries, calls for people to be sovereign over their food systems. A non-negotiable element for food sovereignty is women's rights and their access to land. The increasing loss of traditional crops and wild plants, managed mostly by women in the past, is the main cause of hunger worldwide. The accelerating pace of commoditization for export of few industrialized crops results for the poorest countries in loss of biodiversity as well as the loss of healthy nutritious traditional cuisine leading to diet insecurity, especially for rural women and girls. Most women farmers, worldwide, are aware of their plant knowledges and of their common land dispossession for cash crops export. Women are indeed at the forefront of the bottom-up struggle for the protection of environment, food sovereignty, agroecology and indigenous revitalization to reduce poverty, hunger and to restore agrobiodiversity. By doing so they do empower both collectively and individually themselves. In Kenya, Wangari Maathai led The Green Belt Movement of women for planting trees in order to revitalize soils, recover water and both natural and cultural biodiversity (Maathai, 2004). In India, the Chipko movement of rural women fights against deforestation to preserve lands and subsistence agriculture (Shiva, 1989), the Deccan Development Society is a movement of Dalit women who create community seed banks to develop commons and culinary resilience (Patnaik *et al.*, 2017). And, in more than 33 countries, poor women organize themselves in Shack/slum Dwellers International building solidarity between the poorest people to create new forms of commons and food self-sufficiency (Podlashuc, 2009).

Institutionalisation of empowerment: the strategy of depoliticization

With the adoption of the Millenium Goals for Development, the concept of women's empowerment has become a priority for the large international organizations around the world such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization etc., women's empowerment has been used as a vehicle to reduce gender discriminations and to increase the development of poor countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states. The principal issue that arose was the establishment of a neoliberal organization of the global food regime. At the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, under the aegis of the UN, women's empowerment was described as a development strategy. Changing empowerment into a top-down strategy decided by the greatest international organizations effectively circumventes the most important claims of food sovereignty supported by the rural women movements from the South. This depoliticization changes empowerment into a synonym of agricultural development targeting women for the benefit of the global agribusiness. Individuals and groups may acquire assets and institutions may improve their governance, but these elements in themselves do not necessarily produce empowerment. Microcredit programs are promoted as a strategy for poverty reduction and women empowerment. In patriarchal contexts, targeting women with microcredit enlightens how « women empowering programs » leads to disempowering women as husbands can seize the loans. High rates of interests (20%) make repayment

sometimes unrealistic, increase household poverty by indebtedness, and reinforce violence against women (Ganle *et al.*, 2014). Some interventions that seek to provide women access to resources can have also the perverse effects of reinforcing gender stereotypes. This occurs when some programs are aimed to target specifically women to increase their agricultural productivity for export in order to get money income and taking better care of their family. The picture of the mothering and nourishing woman remains in place without improving women's social status while worsening the length of their working day.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment cannot be a top down strategy but is, *par excellence*, clearly a bottom up one. Rural women movements show that their own interests are in agroecology as it can sustain subsistence agriculture, demonstrate the strength of their practices and traditional knowledge vs occidental reductionist science in order to reach food sovereignty, gender equality and global justice.

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