

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS TRANSFORMING ECONOMIC POWER

Topic 1
August 2011



Food Sovereignty:

Exploring debates on
development alternatives
and women's rights

by Pamela Caro for AWID

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The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) is an international feminist, membership organization committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. AWID's mission is to strengthen the voice, impact and influence of women's rights advocates, organizations and movements internationally to effectively advance the rights of women.

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Feminist Perspectives Towards Transforming Economic Power

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

As many women's rights and feminist groups have noted, we continue in a context of converging global crises. Economic and financial crises cannot be seen in isolation from the food, energy, water, environment/climate, human rights, and care crises. These interlocking crises are part of a failed development model: a model which, at its core, is largely gender blind, patriarchal, and indifferent to human rights, including women's rights.

Women have extensive experience in survival and resistance strategies to failed development models and the recurring crises these have caused. In the lead-up to the 12th AWID International Forum on Women's Rights and Development, we are producing this series to share contributions, by feminist and other social movements, towards transforming economic power. Over the past three years, AWID has been examining the impact of and responses to the systemic crisis from a feminist and women's rights perspective. This series builds on that work to explore diverse alternative development visions—indeed alternative ways to organize economies.

This series does not presume to offer a comprehensive or a complete alternative model to the mainstream economic system. The aim of the series is to share and promote critical analysis on a range of alternative visions and practices that progressive social movements and feminist groups are implementing across the world. We have reached out to key groups, pioneers, and in some cases the

very creators of the concepts covered in this series, to share their visions and practices. These groups continue to work with, and nuance and adapt the concepts in alliance with others. Their contributions aim to: share experiences from the ground and testimonies from diverse groups of women; provide analysis; and build knowledge on alternative visions and practices of development, with a vision of transformation.

As we engage with these alternatives from a critical feminist perspective, we aim to raise awareness and foster debate with women's groups as well as mixed civil society groups on the gendered aspects of alternative paradigms. This work on feminist perspectives towards transforming economic power contributes to the dialogue, the debate, and action on the crisis of the dominant development and economic model as well as sustainable ways forward that work for all people—women and men—and the planet.

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

This article, written by Chilean feminist researcher Pamela Caro, presents key elements of the concept of food sovereignty. Caro is a researcher and social worker at the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CEDEM) based in Santiago, Chile. Caro holds a Doctorate in Social and Political Studies and a Masters in Social Sciences from the University of Chile. She has more than 15 years experience working with women peasants and indigenous women's groups in the design, implementation, and evaluation of social programs aimed at overcoming poverty and social exclusion, struggling for gender equality, and active citizenship.

In this article, Caro unpacks the history of food sovereignty from its origins in the experience of the peasants' movement, (of which the international and Latin American women's peasant movement has played a central role) as a response to a specific political and economic context marked by trade liberalization and the rise in food prices at the global level.

Caro explores the challenges associated with recognizing women's contributions in the agricultural economy in a way that is not tainted with the traditional feminine stereotype in order to transform it into a vehicle of gender empowerment. This article seeks to promote debate among gender equality advocates on how to connect with the peasants' movement approach to food sovereignty and peasants' rights.

This article was first written in August 2010 as a contribution to the V Congress of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC) Conference held in Quito, Ecuador, October 2010.

The photo shown on the cover was taken by the author during her participation at the CLOC Conference, October 2010. It shows mapuche women activists with banners and signs with their demands "Food sovereignty now" and "liberate mapuche territory". Featured (centre figure) is leader Juana Curio who has been fighting for the rights of indigenous women peasants in Chile for more than 30 years.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this article is to compile and analyze current debates about food sovereignty, in which the international and Latin American movement of peasant women has played a central role in linking a women's rights approach with rural development.

This analysis takes place in a context of significant transformations in the rural economy and society since the 1980s, as well as the successive interrelated crises—the global economic recession, climate change crisis, food prices crisis, crisis of the systems of care. All of these have had devastating effects, particularly on women and on the poorest women, and have heightened social and gender inequalities. These crises create an urgent need to open a discussion on the process of building new development models which should

incorporate and be informed by the context and take into account the demands and proposals of a movement to which a significant group of Latin American peasant and indigenous women belong.



Participants from Chile gather at the V Congress of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC) held in Quito, Ecuador in October 2010. Photo credit: Pamela Caro.

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WHAT IS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?

The social organizations that coined the term food sovereignty point out that it is not an abstract concept, but rather a guiding principle and ethic. It does not correspond to an academic definition, but is the result of a collective, participatory, mass-based, and progressive process of construction. This process has enriched the definition as the result of a number of debates and political discussions that emerged during the creation of the entity that serves as an umbrella organization for peasant organizations critical to current agrarian and food deregulating politics. La Vía Campesina¹, founded in 1992, and its Latin-American counterpart, the CLOC, established in 1994, are the main organizations promoting this principle.

In various documents and declarations, the concept of food sovereignty has been defined as the right of all the peoples to define their own agricultural and food policies including: the protection and regulation of agricultural and livestock production; the domestic trade of agricultural goods, in relation to sustainable development; the protection of domestic markets against imports; and the restriction of social and economic dumping of products in the market. It also includes the right to decide how to organize production, what and how to plant, and how to organize the distribution and consumption of food according to the needs of the community, in sufficient quantity

Food sovereignty is the right of all peoples to define their own agricultural and food policies.

and quality, giving priority to local products and indigenous varieties, is thus materialized (“School of Women, Southern Cone” 23-25).

HISTORY

The concept of food sovereignty was first introduced in 1996 by La Vía Campesina, at the World Food Summit (WFS) organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome. The focus of the official debate was the concept of food security, which was reaffirmed as “every person’s right to have access to healthy and nutritious food, in alignment with the right to adequate nutrition and the fundamental right to adequate standards of living, including food” (World Food Summit, 1996).

Rural women’s organizations attending the forum parallel to this summit were critical of the discussion among government representatives. The officials, in keeping with the penetration of neoliberalism and the emergence of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the 1990s, adapted the definition of food security to include the concept of guaranteeing the right to food

¹La Vía Campesina is an international social movement of peasants, small and medium agricultural producers, rural and indigenous women, landless peasants, rural youth, and agricultural workers. The CLOC, the Latin-American counterpart, is constituted by 52 organizations in 20 countries.

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through the liberalization of the food trade. This opened the door to transforming the food industry into a large and lucrative business (for transnational companies, the chemical industry, and the fast food industry, among others). As Francisca Rodríguez points out “all these actions aimed to ensure that the mechanisms of food trade were open to the world.”

In contrast to this concept of food security, peasants’ organizations developed the concept of food sovereignty, which establishes that “food is not a matter of the market; food is a matter of sovereignty” (Montecinos). As a result, the right to have access to food and sovereignty in the production of foods are ‘non-negotiable’. This new and transgressing concept broke with the organization imposed on agricultural markets through WTO negotiations. The WTO norms had already deviated from the protective measures previously implemented by governments through import taxes on cheap food, which favoured the price of domestic foods through price bands—a mechanism to protect countries from the variability of international prices—and maintained public purchasing powers (Montecinos).

The recent Peoples Summit on Climate Change that took place in Cochabamba in April 2010 ratified the concept of food sovereignty to include peoples’ right to control their own seeds, lands, and water. It also guarantees peoples’ access to sufficient, varied, and nutritious food through culturally appropriate local production in conjunction with Mother Earth. And it promotes autonomous,

participative, communitarian, and shared production in each country and nation. This document reaffirmed new visions and conceptualizations based on the concept of *Sumak Kaway*, or Good Living which is an ancestral Andean legacy, as an alternative that has been weaved from within. This approach is in harmony with the principles of a feminist economy, a model that centers on the well-being of all persons, and that is in search of a new vision of human sustainability through the recognition of peoples’ diversity and their integration (Farias).

Embracing the concept of food sovereignty has important consequences for the movement in several areas. It implies a radical deviation from the current productivist, mercantilist policies; a change from export-oriented industrial production to small peasant production that is oriented to ways of life consistent with sustainability, redistribution, justice, and equity. It is important today because it is an alternative to the serious problems affecting food and agriculture globally. It is a vision of the future founded on principles such as peoples’ autonomy and self-determination (León5).

“Food sovereignty is a principle, a life ethic, a way to see the world and to build it on a foundation of justice and equality.” — Francisca Rodríguez

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY MODEL

The following components serve as an organizing model for applying a sustainable model of peasant agricultural production based on food sovereignty.

1 As it is defined, food sovereignty consists of **local production and popular sovereignty**. It prioritizes local agricultural production in order to feed the population, and therefore decisions regarding trade, commerce and distribution are sovereign and local (Leon & Serna 11).

2 The application of food sovereignty implies **the revival of the Integrated Agrarian Reform** struggles which would: guarantee both men and women full rights to the land; protect and recover the territory of indigenous peoples; guarantee fishing communities access to and control of fishing zones and ecosystems; recognize access to and control of lands and migratory pasture routes; revitalize the interdependence between producers and consumers; guarantee the community's survival, ecological sustainability and respect for local autonomy, with equality of rights for men and women; and contribute to ending the massive migration from the country to the city.

3 The knowledge and total freedom to **exchange and improve seeds** is a fundamental component of food sovereignty. In a context of diversity, this guarantees the existence of abundant food, provides adequate and varied nutrition, and fosters the development of culinary forms that are culturally appropriate and desired. Seeds are the beginning and the end of peasants' cycles of production; they are a collective creation that reflects the history of peoples and their women, who were the initial creators and main guardians and improvers of

seeds. The disappearance of this knowledge and freedom carries with it the disappearance of cultures, rural peoples, and communities. Since seeds can not be appropriated, they should retain their character of collective patrimony ("Meeting of the Seed Campaign CLOC-Rural Route"). CLOC-La Vía Campesina has developed a permanent campaign in defense of seeds, related to the defense of land, territory, and peasant and indigenous cultures, and against patents as an expropriation of genetic resources and monopolization of knowledge ("Remembering and re-discovering our history").

4 Another fundamental aspect of food sovereignty is **the struggle against genetically modified organisms**, the promotion of organic agriculture, as well as agro-ecological and sustainable practices based on the right to preserve ancestral knowledge ("School of Women, Southern Cone" 23).

5 Peoples' right to base their consumption of goods on cultural, ethical, religious, aesthetic and nutritional factors. Healthy, accessible, and culturally appropriate food is at the centre of food sovereignty ("School of Women, Southern Cone" 23). In the framework of the human right to food and the expansion of biofuels, it affirms **the conviction that the social function of agriculture is food production**.

6 Recent debates have led to the affirmation that food sovereignty is directly related to the ability to end global warming and cooling of the planet. This will only be achieved through the implementation of a profound transformation in agriculture, **based on a sustainable mode of production**. Industrial agriculture is a contributing factor to global warming and climate change, since fresh food is unnecessarily transported throughout the world, and as a result peasants are denied adequate access to local and national markets.

THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND THE RIGHTS OF PEASANTS

The global financial crisis and its impact on food prices has resulted in the violation of the right to food as a fundamental human right; the inability to exercise or enforce this right represents a limitation on the effective realization of other human rights. The right to food is a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 25: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food" (United Nations).

La Vía Campesina movement supports and speaks about the need for an international convention on the rights of peasants, as it recognizes that current international mechanisms and conventions are limited, especially when it comes to the protection of small producers from the consequences of neoliberal policies ("Declaration of rights of peasants"). A decade ago, this organization launched a campaign to create an international instrument to respect, protect, realize, and promote the rights of peasants, and to promote legally binding local and national mechanisms that guarantee these rights are exercised.

A study of these rights from a gender perspective confirms that they make visible the situation of peasant women, clearly establish the need to guarantee women's individual rights, and recognize the equality of peasant men and women. Food sovereignty includes rights that historically have been a part of feminist demands, such as

"the right to life and to a dignified standard of living" that specifically include advocacy against gender-based domestic violence and the exercise of the sexual and reproductive rights of peasant women. Other aspects include the right to land and territory; the right to seeds and to traditional knowledge and agricultural practices, including the right to reject an industrial model of agriculture and the right to food sovereignty; the right to the means of agricultural production; the right to agricultural information and technology; the freedom to determine a price and market for agricultural products, including the right to develop systems of commercialization within the community that guarantee food sovereignty; the right to protect agricultural values; the right to biological diversity; the right to preserve the environment; the right of association, opinion and expression; and the right to access justice.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND THE IMPACT ON GENDER RELATIONSHIPS

Food sovereignty is a basic principle for building alternative methods of rural development and agricultural and peasant production. It includes not only rural communities but society as a whole: “it is not a peasant topic, but a topic for society and humanity” (Rodríguez). It also includes the relevant participation of women in peasant movements. Using this definition, it is important to analyze the advantages and disadvantages from a critical and historical feminist perspective. It is also important to ask ourselves which elements help to advance women’s rights, and what opportunities and challenges are posed by food sovereignty for the exercise of women’s rights.

Feminists and researchers of gender relationships assert that a patriarchal ideology is at the centre of capitalist trade and export trends, which aim to continuously increase production in search of greater profits, under the assumption that economic, productive and reproductive systems are not autonomous (Hernando 116-130; Carrasco 3-6). This is expressed as the reality that individuals in the productive labour market have daily needs, which render family labour an absolute necessity for the functioning of the capitalist market and production. Carrasco identifies patriarchy as the “invisible hand” of daily life

because the capitalist system benefits from the advantages of displacing production costs into the domestic sphere, and as a result, reproductive labour becomes a condition for the existence of the economic system. Historically, no society has socially recognized or economically valued the activities that are necessary for human reproduction, “life sustainability” or “maintenance,” including food, although they are essential for survival.

In regards to peasant women, their contribution to the agricultural economy has been made invisible (León and Senra 12). Historically women have been involved in the discovery, research and creation of food, since the beginnings of agriculture. They have carried out experiments, hybridized seeds, separated the edible from the non-edible, preserved food, and created and refined dietetics

and culinary knowledge and its tools. They have a long tradition of collecting, selecting and propagating seed varieties according to their nutritional and medicinal uses. They are the world’s primary protectors of diversity and genetic resources. In short, they have developed production, processing and distribution mechanisms while unfortunately engaged in the unequal relationship of unpaid labour. In spite of the significant social and economic importance of these activities, they are invisible in official statistics (León, 2008: 8) and, from a gender perspective, have been devoid of social value. Along with the historic invisibility of

Patriarchy is the invisible hand of daily life. The capitalist system benefits from the advantages of displacing production costs into the domestic sphere.

women’s contributions, prevalent gender disparity is evident in the exercise of rights in the rural world, such as access to credit, land and health care, and titles for exploitation, as well as in the salary gap, lack of personal income or inequality in the division of income when both members of a couple are involved in productive activities (León and Serna:13). All of this occurs in the context of existing legal barriers, as well as major cultural barriers, in rural societies.

OPENING THE DEBATE ON GENDER EMANCIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

CLOC women’s organizations² have been fully involved with building a sustainable peasant production process based on the principle of food sovereignty since its inception. They began with a personal process to recognize their status as rights holders and the oppression affecting women in rural areas and to search for autonomy. In terms of discourse, food sovereignty is in alignment with gender justice. It incorporates an agenda that restores the value of the historical social function of peasant women with regards to the creative process of food production (Montecinos) under the assumption that this will contribute to the recognition of their status as citizens and rights holders. It also includes reparations on its agenda in the sphere of gender

Food sovereignty is in alignment with gender justice.

relationships, as the value of women’s contributions have been denied since the beginning of the patriarchal division of labour (León 8). The question is how to achieve this recognition in such a way that it is not tainted with the burden of total responsibility for a social function that must be detached from the traditional feminine stereotype in order to transform it into a vehicle of gender empowerment.

On this topic, Borderias points out that the process of reevaluating historical social functions, such as the nutritional function, runs the risk of being limited to mere symbolic recognition, which could even reinforce the traditional sexual division of labour if it is not utilized as a political opportunity to question the very organization of the economic system, from the perspective that economic systems are not autonomous (Gil). To face this barrier, the economic character of reproduction needs to be accepted, and food production for self-consumption, for example, should no longer be categorized as strictly reproductive (León 205); instead it should begin to be recognized as a productive activity.

On the other hand, the recognition of women’s historical contribution to food production should also articulate proposals that aim towards a greater

² Organizations such as CONAMUCA in the Dominican Republic, Bartolina Sisa in Bolivia, Red de Mujeres Rurales de Uruguay, Articulación Nacional de Mujeres Trabajadoras Rurales in Brasil, ANAMURI in Chile, CONAMURI in Paraguay and Red de Mujeres Rurales in Venezuela.

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equality in private relationships between men and women in rural areas, in line with the logic that those same peasant women's organizations have recognized that the patriarchal system of relationships is established in communities and everyday life, and as a result, domination and exploitation is the dominant pattern for inter-personal connections (International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty 3).

From a food sovereignty perspective, the proposals with the clearest gender content are associated with equitable access to land, credit, and training, which should be oriented towards women as much as towards men. Nevertheless, there is still controversy in the sphere of private gender relationships about what happens behind closed doors and men's involvement in the responsibility to provide food for their families and communities; in short, the role men play in food sovereignty. In the context of the sovereign right to produce food, the demand is that women's role in the past and in the present, be acknowledged, prioritized, and valued. This has resulted in warning systems for times when women's contributions are at risk of being made invisible, such as when the issues they have helped advance gain political connotations. "For example, in the first stage of the La Vía Campesina seeds campaign, women felt their contribution to the reproductive cycle of seeds was recognized; however, when it comes to seed multiplication, men appear and acquire such notoriety that it tends to make women's

participation in the previous stage invisible" (Rodríguez).

This analysis becomes complex when the attempt to make visible women's historical social function in the sphere of food provision to families, communities, and villages is examined closely. Women's experience in western salaried society in relationship to food-related activities has been one of submission and social isolation. These activities, which are unspecialized, are not associated with change but with recurrence. They do not require displacement to unknown places but rather occur in a known area, and have been structurally opposed to activities associated with individuality and power (Hernando 125-130).

Equitable access to land, credit, and training should be oriented towards women as much as towards men.

That is why the western feminist struggle has tended to question the rigid and naturalized identity between feminine and food preparation, and emancipation has frequently implied "freedom from the kitchen", as a way to aspire to shared responsibility in said tasks and context. Nevertheless, peasant women's voices force a change in perception based on traditional patterns of dichotomous thought, by understanding food conservation and preparation activities from the perspective of "other power," and prioritizing values. "At every step of our journey we have valued that role. What could be a burden for a city woman, for us is a space of power" (Rodríguez).

From a feminist perspective and with gender equality as an aspiration, the horizon includes: making women visible; it calls for a discourse

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where women's political, economic and personal autonomy converges with the exercise of freedom to define a life project; a discourse that questions traditional gender mandates; and a history marked by subordination.

"The kitchen has a very different meaning for us than for city women, it is the space where culture and knowledge are transmitted to new generations. Our cooking is a slower process, carried out in the proximity of heat, fire, seeds, the storage of food, with transformation processes that are more collective in nature thanks to the smell and the flavor they conjure. In rural areas, the kitchen is the most important place in the house."
—Francisca Rodriguez

PENDING CHALLENGES AND THREATS

Reflecting on gender politics based on the principles of food sovereignty lead us to consider the inclusion of men and women in conditions of equality in all stages and components previously mentioned. In other words, food sovereignty in conjunction with agrarian reform, but this time, agrarian reform that ensures equitable land ownership for women and men. Food sovereignty with defense of seeds, with more egalitarian involvement of men and women in reproduction, propagation and exchange processes. Each activity has to be equally valuable, and a system for raising the alarm, when one particular stage that involves men more than women, because of cultural reasons, acquires greater value.

Clearly, food sovereignty has the face and hands of women. So then, how does it contribute to the emancipation of women? How does it free them from the patriarchal domination that they have identified as part of gender relationships present in the peasant world? The answer is neither simple nor unidirectional; instead we could speak of observed ambivalences, or of advantages on one hand and disadvantages on the other, depending on the lens used to interpret reality. For one, it is important to note the transformations that have occurred regarding the exercise of women's rights and how food sovereignty contributes or could contribute to this end. In the context of long-term history, it would seem relevant to state from a gender perspective, peasant women today

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exercise more rights than they did in the past, although there are still many rights that remain to be conquered. For example, in the face of their invisibility and historical subordination within the framework of the existing patriarchal society, both in urban and rural areas, the fact that some women have acquired the status of producers has led to a greater awareness of individual rights and to more economic autonomy. Food sovereignty with gender justice should on one hand reaffirm the progress achieved in terms of equity while on the other consider and provide warning of any regression in terms of sexual subordination.

Food sovereignty is rooted in a people's right to decide what to produce, how to produce it and to define the distribution conditions. From a feminist perspective, it is necessary to sharpen our analysis of how power is distributed and of the decision-making process in those forums where, ideally, the right to decide should be exercised, in order to ensure internal democracy in communities and villages.

Given that food sovereignty alludes to the process of food production, preparation and consumption, a social and historical function assigned to women in all societies, and considering León's approach of putting an end to the productive/reproductive dichotomy, it is worth considering whether these activities in their reproductive and non-compensated aspects should be assumed as a responsibility of society as a whole, and not the responsibility of women exclusively, as part of their sexual mandate. In this way, these activities will gain social recognition.

All these considerations lead to the politicization of food preparation and distribution, a vital function of our economy, because "we women know how to do it, we want to be heard, we want to attain the power that will enable us to accomplish it, and we want to distribute and share the work" (Nobre).

Food sovereignty with gender justice should reaffirm the progress achieved in terms of equity as well as providing a warning of any regression in terms of sexual subordination.

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The Feminist Perspectives Towards Transforming Economic Power series shares experiences from the ground and testimonies from diverse groups of women; provides analysis; and builds knowledge on alternative visions and practices of development, with a vision of transformation.

This article on Food Sovereignty, compiles and analyzes current debates about food sovereignty from a gender perspective, in which the international and Latin American peasant women movement have played a central role. It explores the challenges and promotes debate among gender equality advocates on how to connect with the peasants' movement vision of food sovereignty and peasants' rights.