

## “ WE MUST ACKNOWLEDGE WOMEN’S ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION AND VALUE IT ”

Feminism, food sovereignty and agroecology are inextricably linked for the Brazilian feminist organisation SOF – *Sempreviva Organização Feminista*. We wanted Miriam Nobre, SOF Co-ordinator for the Ribeira Valley, a region in the south of the State of São Paulo, to tell us what the situation is in her country regarding the rights of rural women, what the Brazilian government is doing to strengthen these rights, and what role SOF plays in this context.

### Ms Nobre, what is the gender equality situation in Brazil’s rural areas?

Women who want to continue farming, return to farming or become farmers face a number of challenges. The first is access to farmland. In the last 20 years, rural women’s movements have made important achievements in women’s rights regarding agrarian reform processes, such as joint ownership of lots. Yet women still have access to less land and worse quality land. According to the latest agriculture census conducted in 2006, the average size of farms run or owned by women was just 38 per cent of the average owned property. There were twice as many landless women producers compared with the total number of producers under the same conditions. Within a family-run establishment, women tend to have their power of decision concentrated in the area around the house and have little influence on decisions concerning what and how to plant over the entire farmland.

### Are indigenous women particularly disadvantaged?

Indigenous women as well as women from traditional communities – quilombolas or riverside communities – lack secure titles to the land and have problems removing occupants from their land. At the present time, they are threatened by the repeal of or increased difficulty in exercising rights won in the 1988 Constitution, especially in the federal legislature. They are struggling to strengthen their voice within their communities to ensure that their wishes and land management projects are considered.

### In the education and health fields too, rural women and girls are often in a worse position than their male counterparts ...

Rural women who work as farmers or in non-agricultural activities face particular difficulties here. Although female schooling has increased in the countryside, functional illiteracy still persists

among older women. Moreover, of the women completing secondary or higher education, very few take up agricultural careers. Early childhood education is practically non-existent in rural areas and the progressive closure of rural schools brings problems such as education that is unrelated to the reality of rural children.

As for health, a problem becoming more and more visible is pollution by pesticides, causing an increase of early menarche in women, reproductive health problems and cancer.

### How can women’s social status and economic autonomy be improved?

To strengthen women as farmers, it is necessary to start by acknowledging the work they already do and the knowledge associated with it. In their backyards, women grow food and medicinal plants, raise small animals, domesticate varieties, select seeds, and make agroecological experiments. This production for self-consumption is fundamental in the family economy; also, through exchanges or gifts women’s produce is fundamental in guaranteeing diverse food for the community and for relatives living in the city. We must acknowledge this economic contribution and value it. Some examples: registration in PRONAF – a national programme for strengthening family agriculture – by means of a Declaration of Aptitude (DAP) which allows access to public policies to strengthen family agriculture, should consider production for self-consumption as part of the income of the family production unit; Technical Assistance and Rural Extension, and funding policies should consider backyards and kitchen gardens as production spaces.

Acknowledging what women farmers already do strengthens them to open up new paths: to negotiate with husbands and fathers about other production forms in the family or community establishment, to set up collective production systems managed by women’s groups, and to have an active voice in associations and co-operatives.



Photo: Cinthia Darenho

**Miriam Nobre** is an agronomist. She joined the SOF team in 1993, developing training and research activities in areas related to feminist economy, solidarity economy, agroecology and food sovereignty. Miriam was co-ordinator of the International Secretariat in the World March of Women between 2006 and 2013. During that period, SOF held several joint actions with La Via Campesina, such as the Nyeleni Food Sovereignty Forum held in Mali in 2007. Currently, Miriam co-ordinates SOF’s work team in Vale do Ribeira. She is also a member of the Working Group of Women in the National Agroecology Coordination.

**In everyday life, power inequalities between women and men take different forms – from subtle discrimination through to physical violence. How do things stand on that?**

In rural and urban milieus, gender violence is very present, but it has its own characteristics. Women farmers report permanent disparaging of their production initiatives by their partners: "this is not going to work", "it's a waste of time". Permanent control of women by families and communities is expressed in moral judgement of those who are absent from home to study, participate in a movement or have contact with men in marketing negotiations. Sexual division of labour is very present in agriculture, and it seems quite difficult for a woman without a partner to live from agricultural activity. Thus, single women undergo a series of open or subtle boycotts, and this experience serves as an example to the other women in the community. Fear of not having a partner and going through deprivation is still very strong.

As for ecological agriculture, women farmers report a number of instances of "patrimonial" violence: husbands who apply herbicide to their agroecological crops, who cut flowers, who make it impossible for them to raise chickens.

Domestic violence by a near male relative is the most common. However, increased reporting of sexual violence and femicides practised by strangers is to be noted. In this context, an important aspect is sexist violence used to intimidate social-movement leaders who are fighting for the integrity of their territories.

**Can you tell us a little bit about SOF's work?**

SOF has been systematically involved with rural women since 1996, when it organised a debate and exchange between activists of rural women's movements and the trade union movement in different regions of the country in order to relate the "gender" and "family farming" categories. Action over the years has been moving forward, beyond these descriptive categories of reality to principles that affirm the transformation of current relations: feminism, agroecology and food sovereignty. This transformation was translated into education and mobilisation activities and proposals for public policies. At the end of 2015, SOF began to implement one of the public policies it had contributed to build: Technical Assistance and Rural Extension, or ATER, for women based on agroecology. The activ-



Preparations for technical assistance. Women from Quilombo Cangume, Itaca, drawing a socio-biodiversity map.

Photo: Sheyla Saori

ities were carried out with 240 women family farmers, quilombolas, indigenous and artisanal fishers – the caïças – from the Ribeira Valley, in São Paulo. The largest continuous area of Atlantic Forest lies in this region. It is a biome of great biological diversity in a mountainous region and it is full of water courses. This biodiversity has been maintained and expanded thanks to the traditional communities of quilombolas, natives and caïças that live there. However, government environmental conservation policies often go against these communities.

**Is the extension service still working there?**

This public ATER was developed up until March 2017. Institutional changes in the country following the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff resulted in no new calls from ATER, in particular those addressing women. But SOF's work in the Ribeira Valley continued through a training programme that co-ordinates the personal and collective autonomy of women, agroecological practices and the social development of markets. It has been very important to build a market that mobilises workers and city workers to directly purchase products from farmers in the Ribeira Valley.

Farmers began to count on a monthly income which, although small, has already allowed them to make investments such as buying a

cell phone, improving their communication with buyers, and improving their homes, such as placing flooring on the soil or buying an electric shower. In the city, workers from public universities and residents at the outskirts of Taboão da Serra were able to eat organic products at a price compatible with their income. Relations of trust between buyers and producers were strengthened, for example, people from consumption groups participated in joint efforts to install biodigester pits. Sewage treatment ensures healthy food, improves the lives of farmers who no longer have to live with bad smells and flies, and reduces water pollution.

This training programme was supported by the British Council, and is now supported by the Fédération Genevoise de Coopération. The programme builds on SOF's broader training methodology and educators, with continued support from international co-operation, such as a partnership with Bread for the World.

**Do you also work with men to achieve a change of attitude? And if so, how do they react?**

When we started working in Vale do Ribeira, a first challenge was to get the women to participate in the meetings. It took several months of visits from house to house until we could hold the first meeting that could last only two hours. The women got involved little by lit-

tle and wanted to get more and more. In one community, they arrived back home one day and their husbands were already there, angry because dinner was not ready. They wanted to forbid them from returning to the meetings, but women supported each other and they all came back.

In a debate during an activity organised by SOF, a woman farmer was asked what changes had happened in her home. She went on to tell how her husband had become involved in domestic work to support her in participating in the women's group, and had started taking her and her female companions to meetings. While she was reporting, she reflected and concluded: "I changed, and he changed too." Today he is very involved in installing biodigester pits. It must be noted that it was women's groups that highlighted the problem of open sewage and solving it with biodigester pits.

These examples show that the SOF methodology of generating spaces for reflection and empowerment of women helps them to negotiate other forms of relationships and work organisation in their families. In our experience, this process generates the deepest and most lasting changes.

Furthermore, as the women's groups mature, other problems and solution proposals have arisen that must be shared by the community as a whole, involving adult, elderly and young men. For example, we have been talking with the women farmers and quilombolas about the proposal to install an autonomous communication network – a mesh network. They would also like to use this network to distribute Internet signals in the community. This topic involves everyone – both men and women – and meetings held were attended by women and men of all ages. Another example is women's concern that they are not included in decision-making spaces in the production cooperative in the region. SOF invited cooperative members to learn about the work done by women farmers, by developing – together with the women's groups – preparatory activities for the National Agroecology Meeting.

### What governmental measures aim to improve the situation of rural women?

A number of strengthening policies for women farmers and traditional communities were developed under the governments from 2003 to 2015. Measures were implemented to ensure joint ownership and changes in selection criteria to ensure the rights of female household heads in agrarian reform settlements. Affirmative actions were established at ATER, rural

credit, public procurement programmes, and a programme to universalise rural women's access to civil documentation. These policies were coordinated by a new institutional framework – the Policy Department for Rural and Quilombola Women of the Ministry of Agrarian Development, which had a significant budget.

Most of these policies were worked out with the intense participation of social movements. This is why we talk about the co-construction of public policies. The mobilisation of rural women, such as the Marcha das Margaridas – a gathering of 50,000 women at several moments in Brasília – played a key role in establishing the National Plan for Organic Production and Agroecology (PLANAPO) and policies to combat violence against rural women. Although deeply involved in the construction of public policies, women in the social movements maintained their autonomy and the demand for a deepening and ongoing upgrading of these policies.

### So all is going well?

Not really. The impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in April 2016 meant a profound shift in direction for policies in favour of family and peasant agriculture. The Ministry of Agrarian Development was closed, and its activities are now co-ordinated, with a very small budget, by institutions with less political power. Policies and programmes to strengthen women farmers have been practically cancelled, the Executive Board has been dismantled, and the advisory group created to replace it does not have its own budget or an adequate number of civil servants for implementation and follow-up.

Historical achievements of the rural women's movement, such as the special-insured status in the social security system, are under strong threat in the pension reform proposals with a neoliberal bias put forward by the federal government.

### LAND-USE IN BRAZIL AND RIBEIRA VALLEY

Brazil is marked by a large concentration of land. Data in the 2006 Agriculture Census show that 0.91 per cent of Brazilian rural enterprises account for 45 per cent of the country's rural area. On the other hand, holdings with an area of less than ten hectares account for more than 47 per cent of the country's total enterprises; although they occupy less than 2.3 per cent of the total area, they account for a large part of production and food, such as cassava and beans.

The Ribeira Valley, the region in which SOF operates, is home to 7,037 family holdings, as well as to 24 Guarani indigenous communities and 66 quilombola communities, and also to big farming estates ("fazendas") and very large properties with little or no agricultural productivity ("Latifundios"). It is both the largest continuous stretch of Atlantic Forest in Brazil (1,7 million hectares) and the region with the highest poverty rates in the richest state in the country (State of São Paulo).

To preserve the region's Atlantic Forest, the Jacupiranga Mosaic was created. It is a combination of 14 conservation units of different types covering a total area of 234 thousand hectares. Areas where, historically, traditional communities – quilombolas and caixaras – lived and managed the territory and maintained the biodiversity have been transformed into Sustainable Development Reserves, which, while allowing for some planting activity and forest management, do so with precarious authorisation and with a number of restrictions. That means, the logics common of the use of the territory and the associated knowledge of traditional communities are rendered powerless by policies motivated by "preservation" or "financialisation" of nature.

**Miriam Nobre**

### If you had three wishes, what would you ask from women, men and government?

I would ask women to go on being self-confident and placing hope in their organisations so that the small and large changes they have already accomplished can still carry on working in a very adverse context.

I would ask men to trust that real equality between women and men, although it may imply loss of privileges (meaning the hours not dedicated to housework and care), will enable them to become better people and strengthen the movement advocating for their territories and ways of life.

I would ask government to respect women as women farmers, to acknowledge their economic, social and political contribution, to not threaten the rights that have already been conquered, to resume the policies of income and power distribution and to not be an accomplice to those who take away the life and hope of better days.

The interview was conducted by Silvia Richter