

# FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS TRANSFORMING ECONOMIC POWER

**Agroecology:**  
Exploring opportunities for women's empowerment  
based on experiences from Brazil



by Ana Paula Lopes  
and Emilia Jomalinis,  
ActionAid Brazil

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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.

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### ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

The 2008 food crisis that provoked the global rise in prices of agricultural crops and drove millions of people into hunger has put the corporate-driven agribusiness model back in the spotlight. The search for alternative means of food production based on environmental sustainability is gaining ground across regions with a common characteristic: the need to involve rural men and women, building on their local priorities and knowledge.

Agroecology is not only a way of practicing agriculture or using technologies that do not harm the environment. It proposes breaking with the hegemonic monoculture-based rural development model based on great landed estates, agribusiness, and social exclusion. This article focuses on the paradigmatic case of Brazil, where the capitalist rural development model was strengthened during the Green Revolution of the 1950's based on intense use of improved seeds (especially hybrid seeds), raw industrial materials (like fertilizers and toxic agrochemicals), high mechanization, and extensive use of technology in planting, irrigation and harvest.

ActionAid Brazil's analysis of their experiences working with rural women is the basis for this article. The authors examine the relationship between agroecology and feminism and shows how agroecology is an essential tool that can advance the empowerment processes for Brazilian rural women in family farming agriculture.

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### OVERVIEW

Currently, several agroecology initiatives are in development in Brazil. Although they remain largely unnoticed by the wider society, these initiatives contribute to resistance and opposition strategies against key drivers of the world's current environmental and ethical crises. Within this context, the contribution of women is vital for family farming agriculture and for the development of agroecology in particular. Nevertheless, recognition of these women in rural spaces, including many agroecology initiatives, is almost non-existent.

Rural women in family farming agriculture face multiple interrelated exclusions because of their social, rural, race, and most commonly, gender status. The hypothesis explored here is that agroecology can help rural women in family farming agriculture to develop higher levels of autonomy through knowledge, raw material independence, and participation in other circles and levels of commercialization. Agroecology can open spaces for women to become more autonomous and achieve more power at productive, reproductive, and community levels. At the same time, empirical analysis also enables us to infer that women's participation is essential for agroecology and its expansion, and that frequently women are the leaders of agroecology projects.

Thus, it can be said that there is a positive correlation between agroecology innovation and women's empowerment. However, efforts based solely on agroecology may not be sufficient to

solve all problems of women's marginalization and invisibility. It is crucial then, beyond the agroecology context, to have a feminist perspective that analyzes the norms associated with the idea of family as the perfect institution, as well as with the condition of women's subordination.

Agroecology opens spaces for women to become more autonomous and achieve more power at productive, reproductive, and community levels.

This photo is an example of women's participation in agroecology. Women in the Xique-Xique community of Remanso, Bahia, Brazil are learning about raising chickens. Photo credit: ActionAid Brazil



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### THE AGROECOLOGY MOVEMENT

Several definitions currently apply to agroecology. Some authors see agroecology as a science or field of knowledge, others as a strategic approach which includes methodological tools, including an agricultural model.

Agroecology accepts ecological and socio-cultural biodiversity and recognizes and values diverse kinds of knowledge that differ from the dominant scientific ideology—such as the traditional knowledge and techniques of farmers. Furthermore, agroecology considers alternative assumptions based upon holistic, systematic, contextualizing, subjective and pluralist knowledge and skills (Norgaard and Sikor 53-62). Thus, the practical knowledge and skills of traditional cultures—such as indigenous and rural farmers—frequently equals or surpasses specialized scientific Western knowledge.

With a holistic and collective consideration in mind, agroecology is not only a way of practicing agriculture or using technologies that do not harm the environment. It proposes a break with the hegemonic monoculture-based rural development model that includes *latifundiums* (the great landed estates), agribusiness, and social exclusion. Within this perspective, it opposes a capitalist rural development model.

The integration of knowledge and techniques sought by agroecology consists of what Victor Toledo calls the “dialogue of knowledge”. This is where knowledge is valued and utilized beyond the academic realm to other forms, such as popular

empirical knowledge. In this sense Gliemann argues that formal, social and biological knowledge gained by traditional agrarian systems, together with inputs developed by conventional agrarian sciences as well as experience gathered by technologies and western agrarian institutions, can join to improve both traditional and modern agroecosystems, making them ecologically sustainable (Guzmán, Molina and Sevilla 87-88).

In family farming, agroecology manifests as a resistance to the current development model and its social, cultural, environmental, and economic problems. It opposes the lack of the farmer’s financial capital autonomy; and it symbolizes a resistance to the agribusiness model discussed previously. This gives agroecology processes emancipatory potential.

Agroecology accepts ecological and sociocultural biodiversity. It recognizes and values diverse kinds of knowledge that differ from dominant scientific ideology.

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### THE RIGHT TO LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES IN BRAZIL

The colonization of Brazil started with the donation of vast territorial extensions, called *sesmarias*, plots of land assigned to settlers by the Portuguese kings. The most significant productive activities were agriculture-related—the great landed estates, *latifundiums*. Hence the nation’s colonial history has been dominated by an export-oriented monoculture production model, based on slavery. The production of food for internal consumption was implemented by either small farmers who paid the *latifundium* owners for the use of the land, or by the slaves during their ‘free time’ (Silva 22-24).

During the 19th century, there was an increase in the number of small agriculture farmers due to the end of the *sesmarias* system. However, with the end of the slave trade, a land law was established in 1850, according to which unoccupied lands could only be appropriated through purchase and sale. The new law restricted land access at the same time that wage labor became the only option for those liberated from slavery (Silva 24-25).

With the country’s first wave of industrialization, the core of Brazilian productive activities shifted from small to large scale agriculture (which, at that time, had coffee as the main export product). By the end of 1950, as Brazil was going through a process of industrialization, the need for wider agrarian reform was at the centre of the debate as Brazilian agriculture was commonly perceived as antiquated and an obstacle for the country’s development.

In this way, the Brazilian agrarian capitalist system was installed and evolved, without legitimate democratic participation or respect for land rights. With the process of Brazilian agriculture’s modernization in the 1950s, agro-industrial components were created and resulted in extensive transformations in capital concentration and centralization. Throughout the decades export-oriented agricultural production was stimulated by the government to generate trade surplus to pay the country’s external debt (Silva 2).

During the 1970s, when the Brazilian economy passed through a period of remarkable growth known as Brazilian Miracle, little was discussed on this agricultural production model. The growth in agricultural production led to the belief that previous discussions on agricultural backwardness had been overcome. However, it was already clear that this production increase involved only export-oriented products, not internal market products. The stagnation that followed the Brazilian Miracle reinvigorated this debate (Silva 7-26).

From the 1970s to the present, Brazilian agriculture saw the expansion of the capitalist model, in which production became industrialized and more intensive under financial capital control. The increase in the number of transnational corporations, now present in the country’s agricultural sector, is a result of this. The expansion of large capitalist companies into the Brazilian farming and cattle-raising sector, for example, dismantled several small-scale productive units, resulting in a great number of rural workers who lost their jobs and access to land (Silva 11-14).



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This modernization process set in the Brazilian countryside (and in many other nations) was called the Green Revolution; a reference to the model based on intense use of improved seeds (especially hybrid seeds), raw industrial materials (like fertilizers and toxic agrochemicals), high mechanization, and extensive use of technology in planting, irrigation, and harvest. This model was inspired by the one used in the United States, a nation that has established its implementation in several other fields of agricultural production. In Brazil and in the world the Green Revolution technologies resulted in vast transformations in power relationships (Porto-Gonçalves 225).

Beginning in the 1990s, and alongside neoliberal transformations that were taking place in the economy, technology dissemination resulted in an agricultural development outbreak and the expansion of agricultural borders. Within the international context, a progressive commercial opening and lack of government regulation of financial transactions took place. The era of biotechnology that defines what is called the Second Green Revolution is linked to the goals of the first revolution, sustaining a continuous ideology in the agricultural production model.

“The seed, fertilizer, and chemical inputs sectors, particularly of those developing countries with an increasingly large-scale and export-oriented agricultures, as in southern cone countries of South America were subject to new waves of market pressure from foreign-based transnationals” (Wilkinson 38-39).

In general terms, agricultural modernization elevated monoculture productivity in Brazil and, consequently, exports as well. It was during this period that export-oriented agriculture consolidated its important role in Brazil’s commercial balance and constitution of the national GDP, and it became the national segment with the highest growth. It is important to point out, however, that the Brazilian rural structure in terms of land distribution and social landscape remained unaltered.

“... The ideology of the technical-scientific model introduced by the Green Revolution disqualified family farmers as legitimate knowledge bearers and vital producers of technological development, bestowing the scientific community with the monopoly of the production process of agricultural-technical knowledge. Since then, scientific-technological development has increasingly drifted away from the skills and knowledge of rural workers, coming across as separate from collective memory and cultural and historical values that favor autonomy and social cohesion of rural farming communities” (Petersen, Tardin, and Marochi).

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Even in the last eight years of President Lula’s Administration—despite attempts to implement more equitable agrarian policies in comparison to previous governments—economic integration to neoliberalism and an agribusiness strengthening policy are still contemporary issues in the struggle against latifundiums.

For the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* MST)—an established national player in land rights struggles—agrarian reforms goals should be:

- land distribution;
- eradication of poverty in rural areas;
- fighting social inequality and environmental degradation; and
- guaranteeing food sovereignty for the Brazilian population.

Opposing reactions from rural populations themselves still occur, despite rural Brazil’s years of transformation. Social movements and farmers who are already struggling for land rights are now fighting for another agricultural model in opposition to the model that tends to homogenize the rural countryside. Thus, there is a push for alternative technologies that do not harm the environment and are based on traditional techniques employed by people who work on the land and with other natural resources. In Brazil there is a long history of denial of existing traditional knowledge practices—regarded as backwards—but traditional knowledge and skills are still present in several communities and regions.

It is within this context that agroecology appears, seeking to utilize and fortify these important skills and techniques.

photo credit: ActionAid Brazil



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### AGROECOLOGY AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

As we deepen this analysis, looking at the status of women farmers we see that this emancipatory character needs further development. Agroecology projects and initiatives need to improve their emancipatory propositions for women farmers who lack power due to a double dependency condition: firstly because they are farmers; and secondly as women experiencing gender inequalities, immersed in patriarchal family relations.

It is important to include socially constructed gender roles in this debate to advance the emancipatory potential of agroecology. Agroecology can be an instrument for empowering women, as long as women's work is recognized and valued. Maria Emília Pacheco, discussing the absence and importance of gender in debates and policies that involve production systems, points out that:

“...the invisibility of women's labor is foremost a political issue. The ‘silences’ regarding women require a different matrix of analysis that is based on ecosystems vis-a-vis production systems; that expands the concept of productive labor relating it to the issue of social diversity; and that is part of a wider vision of sustainable agriculture that relates gender with agroecology. The debate is still in progress. (Pacheco).

In family farming agriculture the woman's

role is of extreme importance. Several surveys demonstrate that women are actively present in all productive spaces—not just those typically relegated to women, such as reproduction (Pacheco; Siliprandi 2002, 2004, 2005; Cardoso). Women's work load is heavier than men's, approximately 14 hours per day, compared to men who work an average of 10 hours per day. Women are present in housekeeping activities, and are responsible for:

Agroecology can be an instrument for empowering women, as long as women's work is recognized and valued.

taking care of children, the sick and the elderly; they take care of vegetable-gardens; work together with men in field activities (assist in managing natural resources, and preserving biodiversity); women have an important role in securing the family's food; and

they are responsible for finding and providing water and firewood. Despite their vital contributions, women are greatly oppressed. The gender inequalities they face can be observed in rules and values perceived as normal. For example, Emma Siliprandi (2004), while describing issues related to women rural workers, states that: “For women rural workers being a woman relates more to marriage and maternity, experienced at the same time as a responsibility and fate and, in one way, as a burden in their lives. They associate good qualities of being a woman with negative ones, with family issues. They state that chauvinism is present in a greater extent in personal relationships (in men's power over women's private lives, in the authoritarianism of relationships)” (Siliprandi, 2004).

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With this in mind, several women of the National Network of Agroecology (ANA) sought to discuss gender inequalities more effectively within the context of agroecology. In 2001, for example, during the first national agroecology meeting, they were already concerned about securing a space where they would be recognized as participants. The women also tried to define rules so that they would be recorded as being present at the meeting, as opposed to being invisible. At the end of the meeting they drafted The Women's Letter, which criticizes the invisibility of women within agroecology: “Agroecology, while taking into consideration all the production system's elements, should contribute in acknowledging and giving visibility to women's work, which is essential for the sustainability of the agricultural system, as well as the reproduction of the family system.”

The women also added that it was vital to acknowledge the historic role of feminism and women's self-organization, which placed gender as an issue into the agroecology movement and on to the organization's agenda. In other words, at that time women themselves questioned the agroecology movement for not including them as a constituent part in the agroecology construction process. After the meeting, there was a proposal to create a working group initially entitled Gender, today named Women's Working Group.

The concept of the empowerment of women farmers implies the discussion and consideration of power relationships, as well as measures to gain control over power sources.

There are several converging points between feminism and agroecology, starting from the lived experiences of women agroecological farmers. Our hypothesis is that there is a positive correlation between agroecology innovation and empowerment of the women farmers.

The concept of women's empowerment emerged from important debate and critique by women's movements throughout the world, particularly by feminists from the global South. The empowerment of women farmers means challenging patriarchal relations that give privilege to men over women. The concept of women farmers' empowerment implies consideration and discussion of power relationships, as well as measures to gain control over power sources.

This process, which results in changes in power relationships, can cause conflicts but the results are both at individual and collective levels. Women acknowledge and value themselves, which in turn leads to collective changes because women in the community support each other. Together they build dialogue and redefine values and norms. At the same time they develop new values, new ways of relating with the other and with life itself. And with this, they gain strength to change the social order, be it in productive, reproductive, public, or private spaces.



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We believe women's empowerment in family agriculture entails their recognition as citizens as well as acknowledging and recognizing their work and, particularly, their lives; it means experiencing an external and an internal process in which women may realize the importance of their work and that their lives have meaning; it means that together they can struggle for better living conditions; it means feeling power within them and using that power to choose and have their opinions respected; and it means having autonomy and self-esteem, and the power to change their own lives.

Women from the Settlement Project, Dandara dos Palmares, Bahia, Brazil. Photo credit: ActionAid Brazil



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### THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WOMEN AND AGROECOLOGY PROJECT LED BY ActionAid Brazil

In a moment in which social-environmental degradation is evident and where sustainability concerns have a leading role in current agendas, the search for alternatives to overcome social inequalities and degradation of natural resources is a major issue for the organizations supported by ActionAid Brazil.

ActionAid Brazil, contrary to those who believe in the two Green Revolutions as the solution for agricultural or society's problems, believes that environmental degradation and social inequality cannot be resolved through conventional knowledge only. They believe that if the current processes persists then food security, health, and the lifestyles of an entire society may be jeopardized in the near future.

Agroecology oriented initiatives contribute to reducing existing environmental and social problems through production methods and processes compatible with the objectives of a sustainable agricultural model.

This model establishes itself not through recipes or technological packages, but through experiences based on the local practices of family agriculture farmers. Therefore, agroecology initiatives incorporate the recognition of knowledge, skills, and experience gained by agricultural farmers, connecting them with academic knowledge committed to sustainable agriculture.

In 2005, ActionAid Brazil started to work with agroecology though its partners were already involved in this field. A project entitled "Agricultural Knowledge Dissemination: Exchanging experiences and strengthening the agro-ecological movement" came about in 2006. The main goal was to strengthen agroecology processes by stimulating experience exchanges between the farmers and the technical experts to strengthen agroecology efforts. The project initially involved 12 organizations, already working in an agroecology context. The target-audience was small family producers (both men and women). The project's first meeting took place in May 2007 in the semi-arid region of the state of Paraíba, and 70 people attended (30 were women technicians or farmers).

While the project did not initially incorporate a gender analysis, this meeting enabled consideration of the leading role women play in agroecology, and in maintaining and disseminating agroecological knowledge. It also highlighted women's notable absence in family agriculture and spaces for experience exchange and debate. Thus, one of the main themes of the project became women and agroecology, a result of women's recognition of their absence in important political spaces and on the invisibility of their work in agroecology development. As a result, the Women and Agroecology Project began in 2007 with a large meeting of women aimed at exchanging and putting together agroecology experiences led by women.

To implement the Women and Agroecology Project, ActionAid Brazil invited the National



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Network of Agroecology to participate. The methodology agreed upon focused on women's empowerment through the exchange, collection, and analysis of women-led agroecology experiences. The aim was to profile their work and acknowledge the role of women farmers, strengthening self-esteem, and autonomy.

The process included four stages:

1. The first women's experience exchange meeting, where the importance of systematizing experiences to strengthen women farmers was analyzed;
2. An eight-month period allocated for experience systematization;
3. A second women's meeting to exchange experiences and discuss systematizations, as well as consider the methodological process, highlighting the difficulties and gains during systematization;
4. Publication of the systematized experiences by the women involved.

The construction of agroecological knowledge is associated with the farmer's capacity to understand the contexts in which he or she lives in and produces. This is a way to challenge the notion of men's superiority, beginning with a consideration of reality and the social practices that demonstrate the economic, social and cultural roles that women perform and the factors that hinder their complete recognition.

The exchange and systematization of experiences have been important pathways for agroecology to progress through knowledge integration, although it is important for systematizations

and experience exchanges to walk together. Systematization is a way of analyzing experiences and facilitating communication between them; it is a way of theorizing practice.

Exchanging experiences on numerous issues, subjects, and actions strengthens women and mitigates their isolation. It enables discussions about challenges and gains, allowing women to discover common ground through the realization that their problems are similar to those experienced by other women. It allows them to understand what they are capable of. In the experience exchanges women challenge each other to follow new paths, break barriers, and they are encouraged to leave many of their fears behind. The experience exchanges are spaces that reach beyond the just understanding the experience. The exchanges enable women to contemplate the possibilities and contribute to their empowerment.

This process revealed that systematizing women's experiences is an important tool for empowerment and a strategy for the deconstruction and denaturalization men's dominance over women. As women's experiences are systematized, their problems, capabilities, and results come to light; and a new perception of reality is constructed. It thus favors a consideration of women's role in family farming agriculture, which is equal to or in many cases more important than those of men in terms of the management of reproductive and productive work.

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“With this systematization process women are able to see further. This is special. They never before had this opportunity to see themselves, see what they do. They never had the opportunity to value themselves as a rural workers, as an agricultural farmer. They are able to feel more confident. During the moments that we carried out the systemization they talked about all that they did, about all the plants growing in their ranch and all the work they do. Everything that is in the backyard, surrounding the house, is perceived by the women as being theirs. They name everything, know where everything is, and start feeling really responsible. I participate in a lot of experience exchanges and witness the importance of all the ones I attend. It is also important for me to meet with some people so that they become acquainted with my work. Sometimes we are asleep during that situation, but in the moment of exchange, we wake up”. —Déo, agricultural worker from Camamu, assisted by SASOP .



“One major problem we faced at the beginning of our work was the machismo within our community. Men were basically laughing at us. Our husbands didn't appreciate the fact that we had some project of our own. We had to work with them in the family fields and take care of the house, children, and the elderly, as well as find the time to put the project into motion. It was hard, but in the end we overcame the obstacles: once the men saw that the project was actually going very well, they started to support us.” —Dona Sebastiana, Grupo de Mulheres Vitórias, Pernambuco, Brazil.

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Women involved in agroecology projects are experiencing an empowerment process. Empowerment has to be seen as a process that must be re-invented constantly. According to Foucault and Romano, power is not cumulative and cannot be saved. It cannot be perceived as a unit, an entity, something external, a wand that is passed from one sovereign to another. Power is kept and reproduces itself through practice. Therefore, there is a permanent need to invent and re-invent the empowerment process. There also exists a need for these women to walk constantly towards social, political, economic, and cultural autonomy. These women are currently experiencing an empowerment process because they recognize themselves, and are recognized, as citizens. Their jobs, and especially their lives, are valued by them and by the people that surround them. The participants went through an external and internal process where they realized that their work is important, that their lives have a meaning, and that together they can and should constantly fight for better living conditions.

The Women and Agroecology Project revealed that there is a positive correlation between agroecological dynamics and women's empowerment. However, this is not an automatic process: the agroecology processes must have an emancipatory character for the women where there is consistent effort to remove them from their invisibility and open a space for them to act as subjects. It is important to unpack and revise the assumption that working with the family is the same as working with all its members. It is important

to consider the unequal power relations within the family; in other words, to always verify how the agroecology dynamics contribute or not to women's empowerment, as long as the women are taken into consideration during the process. This is a debt that agroecology has with women that so far, has not been paid.

The Women and Agroecology Project revealed that there is a positive correlation between agroecological dynamics and women's empowerment.

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### GENDER EQUALITY, SUSTAINABILITY AND BIODIVERSITY PRESERVATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Within the current context of the environmental and food crisis, rural development models have become a leading issue. In Brazil, agribusiness has proved to be extremely profitable for transnational financial capital. At the beginning of the 2008 global financial crisis, many market players applied their financial assets to agricultural commodities, which became an attractive option for profit maximization. A lot of funds have used holding commodities to speculate with the anticipation of purchasing future harvests for greater profitability.

Studies during the 2008 global food crisis suggested that the rise in food prices was closely tied to speculative activities in the Chicago Stock Exchange, an international center for agricultural transaction commodities. The seed market concentrated in a few companies made this speculation more plausible because with fewer actors involved, it is easier to manipulate prices. At the same time that the crisis unfolded, large corporations that work with seeds experienced tremendous profit. While consumers suffered with the food crisis, large transnational companies of the food sector experienced profits significantly higher in 2007 than those of 2006.

To speak nowadays of 'agro' is to speak of 'businesses, and no longer of 'culture', which progressively loses space to production homogenization.

The recent global food crisis has an important meaning within agribusiness' liberalization and consolidation since it results from the increase of countries' dependency on exporting food products. Within the current scenario, where countries tend to produce specific commodities, many countries that were previously agricultural producers are now importers of these goods. The food product is cheaper for financial capital (and allows a greater extraction of surplus value); however, it is more expensive for the population.

While analyzing Brazilian production's expansion in fuel production or animal feed (sugar-cane, soy and corn) Porto-Gonçalves observed that the total production area of these crops grew from 27,930,805 acres in 1990 to 41,198,283 acres in 2006, representing a growth of 47.5%. On the other hand, when they analyzed production during that same period of three typical products of the Brazilian staple food basket— rice, beans and manioc flower—there is a decrease in the harvest area from 11,438,457 to 9,426,019 acres, which corresponds to a 17% decrease.

According to 2006 Farming and Cattle Raising Census, there are 4,367,902 family farmer units; in other words, 84.4% of Brazilian units. However, they represent 80.25 million acres, which is equivalent to just 24.3% of the total area occupied by Brazilian farming and cattle raising units. The family farming units' area is 18.37 acres, while non-family establishments represent



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309.18 acres. In this sense, the census validates the Brazilian agrarian concentration. At the same time that it occupies smaller areas (17.7 million acres for plowing and 36.4 million acres for pastures), family farming production is the main supplier of food for the internal market, guaranteeing a significant part of the Brazilian population's food security (IBGE 2).

The agricultural issue has a narrow and direct relationship with local problems, and an indirect one with global problems. A broad debate on current and different rural development models exists in local, national, and international spaces—and family farming agriculture establishes itself as one of the possible models. This is an important debate if we consider that a great part of the world's poor is located in rural areas (DESA, 1996), where we currently find high levels of food insecurity. It is important to remember that precarious conditions in rural zones have negative impacts on urban centers (the resulting rural exodus, particularly by the Green Revolution, for example, led to tumultuous urbanization in several cities). Still, for the first time in history there are more people living in urban areas (which means they tend to not produce their own food) rather than in rural areas. Thus, the debate on agricultural production and commercial appropriation of nourishing products (intensified by the Second Green Revolution) by large companies becomes increasingly important.

The way food is being produced in a globalized world reproduces power imbalances typical of colonial rule and thus a geographical division

of power is reinforced. Transnational companies always have ties with their places of origin (central nations), and despite fractional gains by the middle class, the social and ecological debt of large export-oriented monocultures suggests the logic of colonial sugar-cane and coffee latifundium. To speak now of 'agro' is to speak of 'businesses', and no longer of 'culture', which progressively loses space to production homogenization. The food sector, as with many others, is being colonized by the logic of capitalist production in the necessary search for accumulation.

For Porto-Gonçalves, food monoculture is, by itself, a denial of an entire historical legacy of mankind in search of guaranteeing food security while considering that, by definition, monoculture does not seek to nourish who produces, but rather commercialize the product. The most desirable is not quality, but quantity. It is common for regions specialized in exportation agriculture, especially in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, to constantly live with food uncertainty, not only because the best soil is destined for external-production, but also due to land concentration (Porto-Gonçalves 213).

# Feminist Perspectives Towards Transforming Economic Power

## Topic 2: Agroecology

### CONCLUSION

Through the Women and Agroecology Project described in this paper, we witnessed the persistence of patriarchal culture in Brazil alongside agribusiness hegemony. On several fronts of the feminist movement, even with all that has already been achieved, there are still many barriers to be overcome and many concepts to be redefined. With regard to agroecology construction, unequal gender relations limit agroecology's advance because they conceal the contribution of women as an important segment of the rural population. At the same time, male dominance commonly manifests itself as an impediment to the advancement of agroecology transition by hindering women's free expression, their creative development and, finally, restricting their contribution to the productive unit. When gender relations are equal, power relations within the family are equal; and the agroecology transition process advances with greater speed.

The agroecology innovations experienced by women farmers in their properties challenged the notion of male superiority. One reason relates to women redefining, in practice, the notion of power by bringing to their families a scenario in which power is shared. The deconstruction of power allows change; the "power for" opens possibilities for actions without domination; it is a generating power that creates possibilities and actions. The "power with" is a shared power that manifests itself in collective solutions for a common problem, speaks of solidarity and alliances, and holds

a meaning that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, especially when a group faces its problems collectively. The "power within" is related to self-esteem; it is the interior force based on the individual; it is the spiritual force residing in each one of us, the basis for self-acceptance, self-respect, and acceptance of others as equals. It is gained by the individual through experience, and in the case of agroecological women it is related to how they support themselves and reproduce their subordination. The deconstruction of power does not mean the power of other people will be reduced, but implies changes in social relations.

The women who participated in the Women and Agroecology Project felt the "power within" and challenged gender roles. They used that power to make choices, enroll in courses, and expressed opinions on what was best for their lives. They discovered that they have the potential to change their lives, yet they understood that this will be a constant struggle because conditions for family farmers, especially women, are not always favorable. In this way, they became aware that they cannot stop; they will always face challenges—as women and as farmers. They will work to improve their living conditions and dignity, will not give up easily, and will not subject themselves to the socially subordinate role that is expected of women. As a result, these women are no longer seen as helpers by their husbands, parents, or other men. These women are active subjects and protagonists in family, community, social movements, and have the power to make changes in their own lives.

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## Topic 2: Agroecology

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

Through the analysis conducted by ActionAid Brazil of their experiences working with rural women, this publication examines the relationship between agroecology and feminism and shows this as an essential tool that can advance the empowerment of rural women.