DISMANTLING PATRIARCHY WHILE BUILDING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

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A FRIENDS OF THE EARTH INTERNATIONAL POSITION PAPER

"Without grassroots feminism there is no food sovereignty."

The purpose of this paper is to bring visibility to the debates and reflections that the Friends of the Earth federation is carrying out on the links between food sovereignty, gender justice and dismantling patriarchy. This is a joint undertaking by the Food Sovereignty programme and the Gender Justice and Dismantling Patriarchy working group.

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INTRODUCTION

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users.

Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability.

Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples, as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food.

Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.

Nyéléni declaration.[1]

The concept of food sovereignty was developed by La Via Campesina and brought to the public debate during the World Food Summit in 1996. It has become a major issue within the international agricultural debate and in fora where public food policy definitions are worked out. It is a process that adapts to the people and places where it is put in practice.

Food Sovereignty means solidarity, not competition. It is about building a fairer world from the bottom up, a response and alternative to the neoliberal model of corporate globalisation. As such, it is Internationalist in character, and provides a framework for understanding and transforming international governance around food and agriculture.

La Via Campesina.[2]

This concept is pivotal in the work of our member groups within Friends of the Earth International's *Food Sovereignty programme*. We play a role articulating what member groups and regions need to promote so that peoples can decide and control their own food systems, led by women, peasant, indigenous and black peoples' organisations. We seek to act as a bridge between those who produce food and those consuming it, and we also support small scale farmers. We resist the corporate power that destroys livelihoods, the environment, and causes hunger and conflicts in communities. At local, national and international level we build the vision for food sovereignty and demand policies that support it.

We are indebted to the earlier work on this topic including *Women and Food Sovereignty: Voices of rural women of the South*[3] and in publications by allied organisations such as *Without Feminism there is no Agroecology*[4] or in Nyéléni newsletters.[5, 6]

In this paper, participants from the *Gender Justice and Dismantling Patriarchy working group* (GJDP working group) from Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, Asia-Pacific and Africa describe regional experiences of struggles for food sovereignty that integrate the feminist and gender justice perspective. Their insights enable us to deepen our understanding of why we claim that, "without feminism there is no food sovereignty", how the federation recognises the heavier load of feminised work involved in these tasks, and how we promote equal rights and equity as key to building, sustaining and developing the agroecological practices that feed the world.

The insights of the GJDP working group also strengthen our understanding of how the industrial food system benefits from the patriarchal exploitation of women's work, and showcases the alternative experiences to capitalist exploitation when agroecology and ecofeminism are a key tool for realising food sovereignty.

International Women's Day march in Australia. **© Friends of the Earth Australia**

HOW DOES THE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM BENEFIT FROM THE EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN'S WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF PATRIARCHY AND THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR?

Agribusiness is a corporate-led, profit-seeking and market-oriented production and commercialisation model primarily geared towards international export markets or the provision of food aid as a means of dominating poor people by controlling their access to food.[7] It is developed under a capitalist system "that prioritises profits at the expense of the rights and health of our peoples and territories, and of the ecological cycles and equilibrium."[8]

"Industrial agriculture and patriarchy have many similarities. Both are about authority and domination of one group over another. Both seek to limit the space for participation of women in decision-making processes and further constrain women's access to resources, whether seeds, water or land."

Rizwana Hasan, BELA/Friends of the Earth Bangladesh.

The extractivist and agribusiness system has colonial origins, but it continues advancing over every territory throughout the world through neoliberal globalisation and the power of transnational corporations, displacing communities and local production systems.[9]

Agribusiness exploits resources and common goods as if they were unlimited, operating in the same way on feminised bodies. *"The first territory of exploitation is women's bodies. When we analyse agribusiness exploiting the land, we forget that the first to suffer such exploitation are women,"* says Leticia Paranhos, Economic Justice and Resisting Neoliberalism programme co-coordinator.

Even though they are responsible for 60-80% of food production in developing countries and 50% of the world's food production,[10] women are the most exposed to hunger,[11] as part of the economic and gender injustices they suffer.

While the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) anticipates an impending food crisis as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, that future has long been the hungry present for many people. By 2018, around 821 million people were already going hungry every day, of which 70% were women.[12]

There are currently around 1.6 billion women farmers in the world (more than a quarter of the population), but only 2% of the land is owned by them, and they receive 1% of all credit.[13]

Across the world, women continue being primarily responsible for domestic care and housework, which is unpaid and unrecognised in their families and communities. Moreover, they face discrimination on issues that range from land tenure to salaries, and the lack of specific public policies to ensure their access to rights such as education, health and work, worsens the situation of inequality when compared with opportunities for boys and men.

Women account for 43% of the labour force in agriculture, but lack equal access to productive resources and employment opportunities.[14] They receive 25% less wage payment than men and face discrimination in access to land, whether to buy a piece of land or to hold a land title on their own (without depending on a family link with a man): less than 13% of agricultural landholders in the world are women.[15]

Awareness and training programme for woman on agroecology at the Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM-Friends of the Earth Malaysia) Agroecology and Agroforestry Centre, Marudi, Sarawak. **© Amelia Collins**

80% of the world's food is produced on small-scale family farms, where women play a key role in all stages of food production, in addition to taking care of crops and tending household gardens. Women also play a critical role in artisanal fishing, storage, conservation and reproduction of native and local seeds, and they are also responsible for (unpaid) domestic and care work.

Industrial agriculture focuses on commodity crops and markets but ignores what actually feeds people – kitchen gardens and local markets where women participate.

Peasant men who lose out to industrial agriculture often migrate to find employment elsewhere, leaving women to raise families and fend for themselves.

Agribusiness is advancing over peoples and territories - through land grabbing, harassment and criminalisation of defenders of peoples' rights, and displacement of peasant producers. This is constraining the production of healthy food and the construction of food sovereignty.

At the same time, agroindustry especially affects women's hormonal and reproductive systems, with its monopolistic and contaminating model, including production of GMO crops and the application of toxic agrochemicals. Various scientific studies unveil the distinct impact of toxic agrochemicals on women's bodies. "Many toxic agrochemicals have been found to cause, simultaneously, chronic diseases such as cancer, leukemia or endocrine disorders, as well as malformations". An example of this is the entire production process involved in sugar cane monoculture plantations, which employ women and children, in Central American countries.[16]

Silvia Quiroa, from Friends of the Earth in El Salvador (CESTA), makes it clear that industrial agricultural production involves high exposure for the peasantry to toxic agrochemicals. This has resulted in *"major impacts on women's health,"* including kidney failure problems suffered by women and men. In addition to *"all the tasks that have been left to girls, who spend much of the time that should be dedicated to their training and education performing dangerous tasks such as those involved in processing of sugar cane (you have to burn it in order to get a little higher yield, according to the companies), exposing them to all the pollution that takes place when sugar cane is burned."*

And at the end of the process, it is big business (whether a transnational corporation or a national company) that reaps the profits derived from the whole process of sugar cane production by selling it in large stores or for export, rendering the feminised work that it requires totally invisible and causing great damage to human health and the environment.

The same happens with other types of monoculture plantations that use pesticides which affect women in their reproductive period or who are pregnant. Quiroa adds: *"These are very often considered to be men's tasks only but women also participate in most of that process, including in field or farm maintenance work, and that involves exposing kids, girls and women constantly to that pollution."*

This all-round health problem is found in all regions. From Nigeria, Mariann Bassey said: *"Women are more vulnerable to the health hazards posed by corporate giants for instance their gas fumes* [including methane, ethane, propane, isobutene, n-butane, iso-pentane, n-petane, n-hexane, CO_2, H_2S, He and N_2]." Because of its composition, flaring results in the release of emissions rich in carbon oxides, nitrogen oxides, sulphur oxides, soot, carcinogenic substance such as benz(a) pyrene, dioxin, toluene and benzene, a well-known toxic air pollutant. These compounds do not only contribute to the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere but also add to climate change chaos and health problems for people. Flared gas in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, has also been identified as a cause of acid rain that pollutes creeks and streams, damages vegetation/farmlands and corrodes the roofs of homes. The acid rain results when sulphur and nitrogen oxides mix with moisture in the atmosphere.[17] *"This also has led to the decline in farm produce. The soil loses its fertility, due to atmospheric pollution. As a result of these flares and pollution, farmers' sources of livelihood are destroyed,"* said Bassey.

Industrial agriculture is putting women at more risk by undermining their livelihoods. Ivana Kulic, from Friends of the Earth Bosnia-Herzegovina, said: *"Pesticide companies own the seed companies, and their agricultural model, dependent on purchased supplies of hybrid seeds and chemical inputs, favours larger, more capital-intensive farms. Women have systematically less access to both land and capital than men, and, despite an often sophisticated level of knowledge about farming systems, women still don't get a voice in the shaping of choices around agricultural technologies and food production."*

In addition, employment within agriculture consistently pays women around 25% less than men, Kulic said: *"By keeping women in positions that are given to them by patriarchal norms, the capitalist system is ensuring that it is gaining constant profit by relying on a huge workforce that is not given decent wages, but is still performing in the agricultural economy."*

Strong peasant women learning and practicing agroecology in Xai Xai, Mozambique.
© JA! / Friends of the Earth Mozambique

AGROECOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR BUILDING FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND FOR DISMANTLING PATRIARCHY

Agroecology is one of the main political tools to achieve food sovereignty: a way of life and a scientific discipline that has the capacity to adapt and be applied in diverse ecosystems and cultures. It is a form of agriculture for the peoples, rather than for corporations, that could feed the whole world while protecting life and enhancing resilience in the face of environmental destruction.

To that effect, it is important to scale up agroecological production, which includes promoting equality and equity regarding gender roles in all our practices. We also need to analyse the impact of agribusiness not only in terms of how the concentration and power of the food industry affects peoples, but also in terms of the reproduction or deepening of unequal gender relations. At the same time, and as we have learnt from and together with the feminist movement, if we do not challenge patriarchal behaviour and gendered power relations - including in agroecology practices - it will not be possible to advance much more on the system change we demand. Thus, another challenge ahead is to resolve the hegemonic and/or binary conceptions that we still uphold in our organisations, in order to incorporate the perspective of sexual and gender diversity.

We know that while fighting for physical and economic autonomy, women are on the frontlines in the defence of territories. We must collaborate with and support these struggles for rights by putting in the limelight the key role of women and youth in the conservation and transmission of knowledge and the preservation and reproduction of native seeds through ancestral agroecological practices, with the capacity to adapt, reinvent, create and sustain just food choices and economic systems that are grounded in solidarity.

"We need to confront what we call 'the sexual division of labour' and therefore to problematise the traditional roles of women and men in societies, because these roles are not natural or part of a biological destiny. They have been socially constructed over the centuries, along with the development of capitalism, for the benefit of leaders and elites. This can be seen clearly in the agribusiness model."

Celia Alldridge, former facilitator for Friends of the Earth International's *Gender Justice and Dismantling Patriarchy working group*.

If gender power relations have been socially and culturally constructed, they can (and should) be deconstructed in the pursuit of more just, equitable, egalitarian and non-violent relations. This quest is part of the system change which Friends of the Earth International demands.

Patriarchy, racism, (neo)colonialism, class oppression, capitalism, neoliberalism, extractivism, heteronormativity and ableism cannot be confronted in isolation. System change must be carried out structurally, including a class, gender and ethnic-racial perspective, leaving nobody behind, in order to end the systems that devalue, oppress and exploit women, the peoples and the environment.

LINKS BETWEEN FEMINISM AND AGROECOLOGY: WHY IS A GENDER JUSTICE AND DISMANTLING PATRIARCHY PERSPECTIVE PIVOTAL TO OUR VISION OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?

"At the intersection of agroecology and feminism, women construct a collective identity as subjects of rights historically denied to them." [18]

Agroecology is feminist because it is founded on environmentally-friendly relations of production as well as equitable and egalitarian power relations (key feminist principles and practice).

"For Friends of the Earth International, building Food Sovereignty entails awakening the political subject in women. That is why we do a lot of political formation on Gender Justice within all the programmes of the federation in order to build a new world."

Marília de Medeiros Gonçalves, Friends of the Earth Brazil.

With the sexual division of labour, women are historically and socially responsible for taking care of the household, the children and the seeds, throughout the world. Food sovereignty is the peoples' struggle for their self-determination, and defending native seeds is a central component, and therefore must be promoted alongside feminist struggles for the emancipation and autonomy of women.

A slogan that has become increasingly important in recent years to guide our work as Friends of the Earth International, which we share with allied movements including the World March of Women and La Via Campesina is: "There is no agroecology without feminism".

"Historically, women have undertaken a large part of the actions related to the entire system of life prevailing in rural families such as caring for seeds, defending water, sustaining life within the family, in struggles for land and territory and comprehensive agrarian reforms. We need to re-examine the role that food has in sustaining life and how we women have fought for essential goods for life."

Silvia Quiroa, CESTA/Friends of the Earth El Salvador.

Placing the sustainability of life and environmental and social justice, alongside feminism and feminist economic analysis as the central axes for organising our societies, allows us to show the relationships of reciprocity and dependence between human beings and nature.[19]

"We value the role of women in agriculture not because we are mothers, not because we have a biological connection to Mother Earth, but because we have a historical, spiritual and activist connection to our territories. We do not rely on a "so called" biological destiny to justify the value we place on women in agricultural roles," says Celia Alldridge, recalling the GJDP working group's commitment to integrate the ecofeminist perspective across the federation, as a philosophy and practice that advocates for changing the prevailing social fabric in a manner that respects the material and relational bases that sustain life.[20]

We want to dismantle all structures of power and oppression on the basis of an anti-capitalist, grassroots, peasant and grassroots feminism built with women and LGBTQ+ persons through political action, in the struggles that we wage in the streets and territories.

The prevention of violence against women and LGBTQ+ persons is also a principle that the feminist movement has built into the food sovereignty movement and agroecological practice. This is aligned with our internal Friends of the Earth International process to integrate the prevention of gender violence into all our solutions.

The Food Sovereignty and Agroecology paradigm, with its practice of solidarity, is a clear way of modelling system change and including the feminism that is promoted by Friends of the Earth International, through "collective actions that challenge gender roles as well as paradigms of inequality, oppression and exploitation," as summarised by the Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition.[21]

However, "here the question arises of how movements can construct global strategies to bring back or revive the memories of production and food sovereignty from and for traditional Peoples, particularly peasant women. This should be from the perspective of the construction of a food culture that is not linked to the globalised production model. From the grassroots, systems of production and reproduction of life were created wherein women have a central role. Women have not necessarily been recognised as political participants in the construction of these systems, but their foundations were secured through women's labour."

"Now, it is clear that it would be counterproductive to reproduce the sexual division of labour that brought us to this crisis in the care economy, and which led to increased pressure upon women.

We need to undo this, but how? One way is to consider care work as work which is essential to the economy, while remembering that it must be taken on not only by society but also by the State. Therein arises a dispute with the State."[22]

In keeping with this, agroecology "allows the overcoming of many of the dichotomies that reinforce the sexual division of labour throughout the food system and make women's work invisible."[23]

From a feminist economic perspective, one of the challenges to economics based around life is that, "women underpin the economy and bring more than social issues to the transformative agenda. In other words, women do not solely come from the perspective of oppressed people denouncing oppression, exclusion and exploitation but they also build reality from different economic practices amidst injustice and discrimination. This economic practice identifies the connection between life and the possibility of transforming the economic system. This is key for defining the path towards transformation and establishing the roadmap towards recovery."[24]

Agroecological practices offer the possibility of people carrying out productive tasks with greater gender equity and fostering greater autonomy for LGBTQ+ persons, whether in indigenous and rural family farm production or in work cooperatives. Consequently, this agroecology and feminism approach is also linked to the promotion of feminist economies.

"We know that the only just and environmentally friendly system is agroecology and it also entails that women can participate. There are serious problems of inequality rooted in capitalism and patriarchy that we want to dismantle. We want equality and equity for all. We want women to be part of a production system that is more just, so that they are able to make their own decisions, which will end up benefiting them and their communities. Because we cannot have environmental justice without gender justice, and we cannot have gender justice without the participation of women. This is key to understand the relationship between oppressive systems."

Rita Uwaka, Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria.

The traditional analysis of food production (both agroecological and industrialised) has reduced land, women as farmers' wives, animals and nature to production factors in a "male production process"[25] thereby translating their value into pure economics. For that process to work, women, livestock and nature are treated as machines to be optimised for maximum productivity, which has led to overexploitation and overlooking their intrinsic value.

In this sense, it is recommended to consider in future projects and planning of the Friends of the Earth International federation how gender diversities and LGBTIQ+ communities could be given more visibility, in order to deepen an intersectional feminist perspective on our food system.

INTERSECTIONS OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND GENDER JUSTICE: DEMANDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FRIENDS OF THE EARTH INTERNATIONAL MEMBER GROUP EXPERIENCES

According to the inequality report published by Oxfam,[26] women living in rural communities and low-income countries dedicate up to 14 hours a day to unpaid care work, five times more than men in the same communities. This statistic is a lived, patriarchal reality in the lives of women in the vast majority of our societies, which has severe daily impacts at all stages of our lives: in education, work, economic autonomy, sexual and reproductive autonomy and time for cultural, social or activist activities.

If we want to change the system, we must also fight to dismantle patriarchy.

"As a grassroots environmental and social justice federation, Friends of the Earth International sees system change as crucial for the transformation of our societies. We recognise gender justice and the dismantling of patriarchy as key to achieving this transformative change. In other words, we believe that our vision for social and environmental justice will become a reality only when we challenge and dismantle the systems of oppression which work together to concentrate power in our societies, through the exploitation of our bodies, work, territories and nature. These are systems of oppression founded on patriarchy, class, capitalism, racism, neocolonialism and heteronormativity. We affirm grassroots, anti-capitalist feminism as an essential tool to achieving equality, gender justice and, ultimately, system change."[27]

It is key for Friends of the Earth International to address this struggle jointly with comrades from the World March of Women and La Via Campesina who have experience working with a feminist perspective.

One of the main demands in the regions, that we have learnt and practiced with the feminist movement across the world, is to take into account the unpaid work performed by women, mostly domestic household and care work, agriculture and food production. We must reorganise this work and share the responsibility between men, women and the State.

"Women's unpaid work is crucial to capitalist accumulation. So should we pay for household work, for the work of caring for and tending our families and communities, our peoples and our territories? We understand why feminists made that demand historically, but what we are fighting for is a transformation of the economy, recognising that care work is crucial for the system and key to the life of all human beings and the survival of communities and peoples, and re-organising this work so that responsibility is shared between men, women and the State. And therefore, in our construction of alternatives and solutions as a federation, we understand that all programmes must integrate this demand for the recognition and valuing of care work as work and its reorgansation within our societies, as we have learnt together with the feminist movement," through the promotion of more equitable and co-responsible gender relations also in those tasks of life reproduction."

Celia Alldridge, former facilitator for Friends of the Earth International's *Gender Justice and Dismantling Patriarchy working group*.

It is essential that all this contribution that we women are making by putting life at the center of the national economy is considered part of the economic analysis that is done in our countries. It is often said that the issue is macroeconomics, but making an analysis from a feminist economics perspective is urgent."

Silvia Quiroa, CESTA/Friends of the Earth El Salvador.

"When you visit any hospital (in Nigeria as well as most African countries) 90% of those who stay in the hospitals with the patients and care for these patients are women."

Mariann Bassey, Food Sovereignty Coordinator, Friends of the Earth Nigeria and Africa.

"To document and highlight women's struggles for the essential goods for life and consider household and care work as part of the contribution of women to national economies, should be part of the analysis of the life support systems of a nation is critical. So far, the analysis focuses mainly on macroeconomics: how much do countries, companies, institutions earn from exporting or importing products? It is time to make an analysis of micro-economies with a feminist economy perspective that includes families and the fundamental role that women play. This must be part of the conversation when discussing about the care economy."

Silvia Quiroa, CESTA/Friends of the Earth El Salvador.

Economic freedom and the model of economic emancipation imposed by the capitalist market is a worn out and outdated model that is extractive of life, of bodies, of resources. Our struggle is for the emancipation of the peoples.

"Women are present in the food production system, but it is still exceptional for them to be actively involved in receiving subsidies and grants, or to own land. For example, in Serbia, women own only 30% of agricultural land. To make sure food sovereignty is our reality, we need to implement all the tools and practices that will strengthen women and ensure that their demands and needs are met on a daily basis and that their work is respected."

Ivana Kulic, CZZS/Friends of the Earth Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Having access to water, land and seeds on a non-discriminatory basis and without corporate impositions on what to grow or how to grow it, are part of our demands.

The participation of women at different levels is essential: *"It goes beyond a quota, and it is a challenge to ensure that they have the possibility to participate for example by securing childcare spaces so that women who have children do not lose their place,"* says Leticia Paranhos. We must discuss how we want women's contribution in the processes of development and sustainability of our peoples and countries to be considered, with participation and roles in the entire decision-making process.

Recognising women's contribution to the conservation of native seeds, a cultural heritage in which life is sustained is also needed: *"How we have cared for the seed, how we have cared for the territories, how we have cared for such essential goods as water and land; this must be considered as part of our vision,"* says Silvia Quiroa.

Women are particularly affected by land grabbing and criminal actions often carried out in collusion between conglomerates of transnational corporations, governments and criminal groups. We need to be on alert and develop collective, regional and internationalist strategies to confront the systematic criminalisation of women defenders of peoples, territories and commons.

Women's struggles based on peasant and grassroots, anti-capitalist feminism also aim to change the patriarchal and colonial visions around collective and community ownership of land, to ensure that land is divided equally between men and women who work on it, including in individual and joint ownership.

"Specific suggestions include the promotion of balanced participation of men and women in all stages of food production and distribution, the establishment of warning systems when, for cultural reasons, activities carried out mainly by women (such as seed reproduction) are undervalued and, conversely, when public activities in which men tend to be more often involved (such as sales) are overvalued."

Ivana Kulic, CZZS/Friends of the Earth Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Another demand is for a broad range of public policies that ease women's care work burden and support them to have more and collective control of the economic and production chain, including the sale of their products in the markets, in order to strengthen women's economic autonomy.

Women face many complex challenges around the world as a result of the capitalist system of exploitation and patriarchal domination. We must continue pushing to transform this reality, to stop the neo-conservative extractivist offensive that seeks to drive the further enrichment of the few through the exploitation of women's work, our territories and violations of peoples' collective rights.

Campaigning at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity negotiations for a post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. **© Earth Negotiations Bulletin**

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Women raise their voices at the March for the Climate, during UNFCCC COP25 in Madrid.
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ENDNOTES

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