

Building autonomy through agroecology

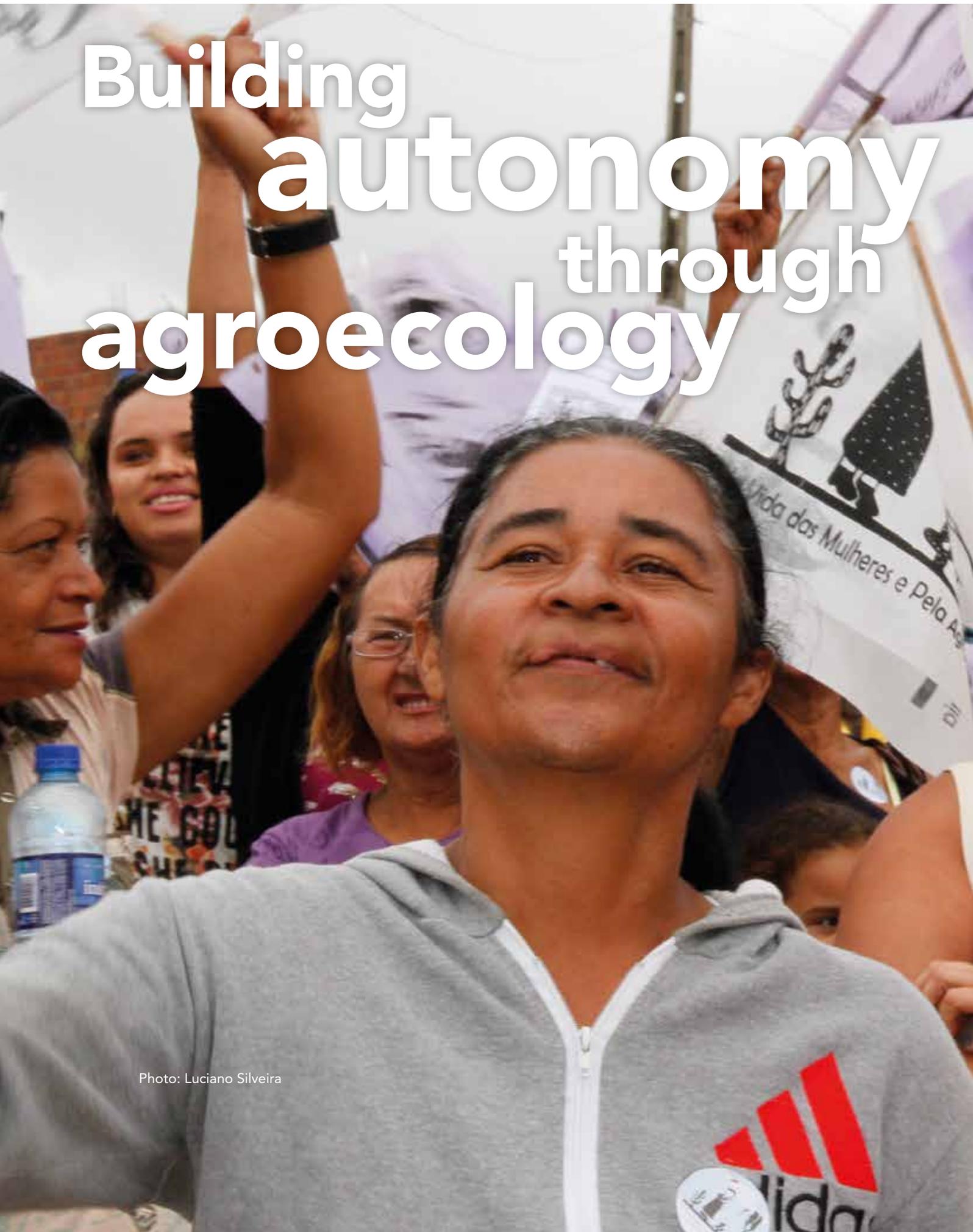


Photo: Luciano Silveira

A strong network of female farmer-innovators in Paraíba, Brazil has been driving fundamental change in the lives of hundreds of women. Collective learning among farmers has brought rural women out of their isolation and into positions of leadership. The success of the women's movement lies in its link between experimentation with agroecology and reflection on inequalities.

Adriana Galvão Freire

“I am not a slave, nor an object - I have no owner, I am not a piece of property - I want freedom to be a woman...”. These were the chants of over 5000 women smallholder farmers from the Borborema Pole farmers' union and from other regions in the state of Paraíba in Brazil as they marched through the city of Lagoa Seca in early 2015. Their songs became the marching call in the struggle for autonomy, for an end to all forms of oppression and violence against women, and in support of agroecology. Dressed in white or in lilac, with flags in hand and hats on their heads, the women took to the streets as part of the 6th *March for the Lives of Women and Agroecology*. They shared experiences and discussed different forms of violence that they experience. The march was organised by a strong network of female farmer-innovators who have been driving change in the lives of hundreds of women, and creating a development plan for the region based on agroecology.

A network of female farmer-innovators The Borborema Pole is a forum of rural workers' unions and family farming organisations covering 14 municipalities and more than 5000 families in the semi-arid Borborema region. From the early 2000s onwards, the Borborema Pole and AS-PTA, an NGO active in the region that is also a part of the AgriCultures Network, began to devise collective, local development plans based on strengthening family farming and the promotion of agroecology.

Methodological principles of building on local knowledge and collective learning among farmers lie at the heart of our work. Through these principles we have supported family farmers in developing numerous agroecological innovations to overcome technical, economic and socio-organisational barriers over the past 15 years. Despite successes, however, a patriarchal culture remained dominant both within the family

and in organisations in the region. This made women's knowledge, their practices, and their importance for the farm household invisible. Their capacities were not fully being put to use. The inequality between men and women was a barrier to the full implementation of agroecology across the region.

In 2002, the gender issue came to the fore. A group of women began reflecting on what they were doing on their farms and in their daily lives. Through this participatory appraisal the group began to work towards a collective understanding of their role in the family farm. An important realisation was that most of their activities were concentrated within the house and its immediate surroundings.

Arredor de Casa This space was coined Arredor de Casa, which literally translated means 'around the house' and refers to the yard, the outdoor space around and pertaining to the house. The women identified the different components of their yards, the multiple functions they have and the significance of their own knowledge and practices in relation to that space. They found that it is an important space where the women are involved in many activities: water is effectively re-used, medicinal plants preserved, and new seed varieties are tested. The crops and small livestock produced there form an important contribution to the household economy.

The women also started to identify the main challenges they faced and how they could overcome them. A major challenge they identified was land. The area of the backyard was coming under pressure. Borborema has a high concentration of family farms that are subject to land fragmentation. As families find themselves with smaller plots of farmland, the fertile and humid land surrounding the houses became attractive for men to use for their farming activities. Conflicts of interest over these areas of land resulted in an increase in the economic and social vulnerability of the women, leading to extreme situations of subordination, domestic violence and increased poverty.



Women learning from other women. Photo: Adriana Galvão Freire

To make the work of women more visible and valued, a Regional Backyard Seminar was held. Over 150 women participated and shared successful backyard practices. The Committee for Food and Health was formed that went on to organise a training programme for women farmers. A movement to revitalise and reorder the *Arredor de Casa* started to take shape.

Unearthing the knowledge of women The committee acted as a catalyst for farmer-to-farmer exchanges based on the methodological principles of collective learning of the Borborema Pole. This gave rise to a network of over 1300 women farmer-innovators. Women visited each other's farms addressing specific technical problems and offering solutions based on principles of agroecology. The Committee for Food and Health follows up with women to support them in adapting and implementing the solutions they identify for their own farms.

Making their agroecological knowledge visible and explicit motivated many women to experiment more

The women also carried out specific studies on medicinal plants, small livestock, native fruits, poverty alleviation and economic monitoring of their farms. This was key in unearthing and organising the wealth of knowledge held collectively by women. Making this visible and explicit motivated many women to experiment more.

The exchanges were also vital in overcoming the isolation that many women experienced. They could now meet and get to know each other, allowing for the gradual removal of cultural barriers which had 'tied them to the kitchen.' Through these meetings a collective identity was being forged, that of *women farmer-innovators*.

As a farmer in Remigio put it: "Today I am a different woman. Before, when I saw people I never felt like talking, being open. I just listened to them speak. Today no! Today I speak with the whole world. I became stronger, as a woman, as a mother. When I and other women started participating, something men were already doing, many things changed in my community. Especially for me. I feel fulfilled and will continue to participate!"

Two major perceptual shifts were fundamental for the consolidation of this process. The first was the recognition of the backyard as an important subsystem within a family establishment for its potential to generate wealth, food security and sovereignty and wellbeing for the family. The second was that women gained more sway in both public and private spheres as they

reclaimed control of the backyard areas and were successful with their agricultural and economic undertakings.

Rotating Solidarity Funds – a tool to self-organise The Committee for Food and Health established Community Rotating Solidarity Funds (RSFs) to support women in applying at home the ideas generated from the exchange visits with other women. The RSFs are based on the principles of reciprocal exchange and mutual support that have long existed in the practices of rural communities in the region. Now, a growing number of women farmers from over 90 communities are part of Solidarity Funds.

When women would leave the house and return with a concrete way of improving the wellbeing of the family their relationships with the other members of the household changed. Suddenly women could overcome their financial limitations and implement change. Furthermore, they learned to self-organise to overcome inequality and oppression. At times, their journey led them into conflict within the family, revealing the oppression and subordination of women of the patriarchal culture in which they live.

This gave rise to further analysis of gender inequality by the women themselves. It became clear that progress towards a political strategy for women to reclaim territory could not be achieved without understanding and challenging the inequality between men and women.

Overcoming oppression and gender inequality At the end of 2007, AS-PTA and the Borborema Pole began to look for ways to make these changes in the lives of women permanent. Three women farmers who had taken on leading roles in the promotion of agroecology shared their personal stories in the network of women farmer-innovators.

These stories opened the doors for other women to express the lack of recognition for their work, and the inequalities with respect to the use of space, time and money that they experienced, many for the first time.

Women visit other women's yards and share their experiences and their knowledge.

Photo: Adriana Galvão



Women spoke about ending violence and oppression against women and in support of agroecology.

Photo: Luciano Silveira

Through this sharing, the group of women were filled with courage to overcome subordination. Pathways to new forms of leadership emerged.

From this point forward, gender equality was mainstreamed across all aspects of the work of the Borborema Pole and AS-PTA. The stories catalysed action, not only the within the Pole, but countrywide when they were shared by the Brazilian National Articulation of Agroecology (ANA). When ANA began to promote this work, it was an important tipping point for self-organisation of women.

The struggle continues With the annual March for the Lives of Women and Agroecology, the women's movement is now more visible than ever. Participation grew from 700 women in 2010, to 1800 in 2011 and 5000 in 2015. In the beginning the majority of the women joining the March were farmer-innovators. Now participation is much broader. Events focused on how to combat the cultural barriers that uphold the inequality between the sexes precede each march.

It is clear that the success of the women's movement lies in creating a direct link between agricultural experimentation and reflections on inequalities. This generated new, accessible, and functional concepts of roles that helped both genders in family farming to flourish. One result of this work is that women now play important roles in the management of the Borborema Pole at the municipal, state and even national level, contributing decisively to the Pole's political project.

The leaders of the Pole say that "now is not the time to pack away our flags, the struggle continues every day." With the aim of resolving conflicts, relationships between men and women are gradually evolving. It is fair to say that there is still a long way to go. Nevertheless, what matters is that these women are leaving their mark on the historical struggle for social change, in the struggle for the lives of women and agroecology.

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