

# A look at the Women Farmers' Movement (MMC) in Brazil

## Getting food sovereignty and women's

The concept of food sovereignty gives visibility and recognition to the role of women in producing food and other agricultural goods. Getting food sovereignty onto the political agenda is very much related to the issue of women's rights, particularly those of rural women. By organising political campaigns, the Brazilian Women Farmers' Movement (Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas – MMC) is attempting to do just that. And in doing so, they demonstrate the important role of women farmers.

Laetia Jalil

The discussion that is currently going on around the concept of food sovereignty in Brazil has many political and social shadings. It reflects a complexity of social, political, economic and cultural realities. Food sovereignty guides the policy priorities of various movements – both within civil society and the government – and also links urban and rural areas. It even transcends national borders, to international organisations such as La Vía Campesina.

As a movement that has grown out of political activism in the 1970s, the Women Farmers' Movement recognises the relevance of the concept of food sovereignty for rural women. In Brazil, women represent 47.8 percent of the population residing in rural areas, of which only 16 percent hold titles to land. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 40 percent of the rural population has no basic identity papers such as a birth certificate, and of this total, 60 percent are women. Of a total of almost 15 million women, most do not have access to health services and schooling, nor does the government recognise their needs as family farmers, rural workers or victims of racism in the case of those of African descent. Without papers, people cannot have their basic human rights protected, and they can neither vote, hold titles to land, nor get access to credit.

### Valuing food sovereignty

"Food sovereignty is about the right to say 'this is ours, this is what we produce', and to not depend on others to produce food for us. The seed we use is ancient, based on conservation practices of the first inhabitants of this land. A company cannot therefore come in and try to cheat us, saying that what we do is not valuable, useful or profitable. We can prove our worth through our daily farming practices. Our production has potential, and it gives us the strength to fight for and value what we do in our work and in our lives." Quotation from an interview with the municipal MMC co-ordinator in Descanso, Santa Catarina, May 25<sup>th</sup> 2008.

### Campaigning for rights

An important focus of the activities of the Women Farmers' Movement is on the participation of women in public functions and the redefinition of their practices at home. The movement is found throughout rural and urban Brazil. Per state, it is organised into regions. Each region comprises a number of municipalities, whose co-ordinators organise grassroots groups, conduct training activities on women's rights and participation, and develop campaigns and workshops on indigenous seeds and medicinal plants.



Poster from MMC's national campaign for healthy food production: "Produce healthy food, care for life and nature."

In 2007, the Women Farmers' Movement embarked on a political campaign in preparation of the International Women's Day on March 8<sup>th</sup>. A march, bringing together a large number of women, kicked off the campaign to highlight women's roles in food sovereignty as well as issues such as violence against women and the struggle for welfare reform. The slogan "Produce healthy food, care for life and nature" stressed the importance of the production of healthy food.

The goals of the campaign were multiple: to advance the struggle for food sovereignty in order to combat hunger, poverty and poor health and to increase support for small-scale food producers through technical assistance, infrastructural improvements and subsidies. At the same time, the campaign intended to build awareness on biodiversity and environmental conservation, partly through agro-ecological practices. The campaign focused on agrarian reform and better public policies for rural areas, concerning things such as welfare, health, education, homes and transportation.

### Activities on three fronts

The campaign initiated projects to revive local and forgotten varieties of seed (through seed banks, improvement and exchange), medicinal plants (preserving local knowledge) and agro-ecological production (by organising agro-ecological fairs that focus on food habits and sustainable care of the environment). Meetings took place at which people could learn about and exchange their experiences of using non-commercial seed and agro-ecological practices. Throughout the campaign, municipal co-ordinators also received training courses to improve their agricultural capacities and awareness of women's issues, in order to create a stronger network.

A year later, on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008, the Women Farmers' Movement organised simultaneous demonstrations throughout Brazil, to

# rights onto the political agenda

present a series of demands to the government. For example, 600 women came to Florianópolis, a city in southern Brazil, to demand that the municipal government construct 600 water tanks, and set up 30 medicinal gardens and three literacy classes. Two women farmers explain the importance of their message:

*“What is the relevance of March 8<sup>th</sup>? It is to strengthen our campaign. If we had a water tank, our gardens would be quite different, and we would not run out of food. Water shortages happen (we have already had one this year), so we hope that our message will mean an answer to this question.”*

Rosalina Silva

*“I think these two things the campaign and the agenda of March 8<sup>th</sup> are very much linked, because if I want my garden to produce, I need a water tank. If the state were to build and safeguard water availability, it would make a lot of sense. Because if you say to someone, ‘Make a garden’, a garden without irrigation will not succeed. For this, we have to fight because it is the right of women to have access to a garden, to water, to schooling.”*

Iraci Colombo

## Visible results

By implementing the campaign for healthy food production, the Women Farmers' Movement has come to understand better

how the practices of women farmers reaffirm the struggle for food sovereignty. The movement has become much stronger because of the campaign, particularly by linking rural and urban women. At the same time, the movement experienced that they can use the concept of food sovereignty to influence policies towards a more democratic society. A main highlight of the campaign was when the movement made specific demands to the Ministry of Welfare regarding the inclusion of women in the national discussion on universal welfare reform. As a result, the government was forced to include women in their official discussions on the reforms.

Battling for food sovereignty is not only about questioning the model of commercial production, but also about recovering and valuing local knowledge and family farming culture. Strengthening food sovereignty should at the same time strengthen the fight against oppression of women and degradation of the environment. This should lead to new social relations, characterised by solidarity, respect, recognition of diversity, and solving the critical question of inequalities between men and women. Only then can we change the world to change women's lives!

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## Women farmers on food sovereignty: the Netherlands



My name is Margreet Arkema and I live in Noordbroek, in the north of the Netherlands. My husband and I, together with our two sons, have an organic cattle farm. We have cows of the Blondes race, some pigs and 400 chickens, as well as 100 hectares of non-organic wheat, maize and rapeseed. We are small- to medium-scale farmers according to Dutch criteria. We are

unique in that we raise different kinds of animals (most farmers have only one kind) and that we sell the meat in our own butcher shop. My eldest son is a butcher and once a week we call for the meat inspector to witness the slaughter of some of our own animals or those of colleagues. Chickens go to a slaughterhouse elsewhere. It is too expensive to do that at home: we would

have to hire the inspector for 2 days a week, to see every chicken before and after slaughter, as regulations prescribe. The shop has been our salvation: without that regular income, we would have had to sell some of our land. Prices of land are high and with our 100 hectares, you could call us wealthy. But it is not wealth that we can spend.

We started our farm in 1982, growing wheat and maize. Later we extended our activities with a cattle fattening unit, to have some work in the winter. When customers asked for organic meat, we only had to adapt our fodder to biological standards, as we already fulfilled the other organic requirements. The animals have room to go outside and the calves stay with their mothers: we have always liked that kind of farming more than intensive farming. I especially like the fact that our farming is local. We produce meat for the local market and our customers know exactly how their food is produced. I'm very proud of that. I only wish we could cultivate our own organic fodder. But we are on clay soil here and it is simply not possible to cultivate crops organically: weeding by hand is too heavy. So instead we deliver our non-organic wheat to a corn trader and buy organic animal feed.

Interview and photo: Mireille Vermeulen, editor  
LEISA Magazine.