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**Women’s grassroots movements in defence of basic rights
to land and food**

Expert paper prepared by

Maria Luisa Mendonça, Network for Social Justice and Human Rights; Women and ESCR
Working Group*

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Current context:

From the perspective of women's grassroots movements, defending basic rights to land and food is a constant struggle. Around the world, the expansion of agricultural production for export, controlled by large landowners and corporations, continually displaces rural communities. They are forced to leave their lands and means of subsistence, and become vulnerable to labor exploitation in large plantations or in urban centers, facing a condition of poverty and hunger.

Around the world, the majority of the poor are the landless, followed by those whose poor-quality plots are too small to produce enough food for subsistence. The expansion of mono-cropping of agricultural commodities displaces poor peasants, women and indigenous communities to marginal areas and the periphery of urban centers, where they often face unsafe and insecure housing conditions.

The more favorable lands around the world are used for intensive mono-cropping production. Many of our planet's best soil and water sources are being degraded, which increases the price of food and accelerates the impacts of climate change. The agriculture productive capacity decreases due to soil compaction, erosion, waterlogging, and the loss of biodiversity. The products harvested from more fertile lands are usually negotiated as commodities in financial markets, generating price speculation and food insecurity around the world.

Some of the main concerns for rural women's movements, including small farmers, pastoralists, fishers, peasant and Indigenous women, are displacement by the expansion of agribusiness and extractive industries, violence against human rights defenders, and financial speculation with farmland and agriculture commodity markets. Other factors that exclude women from access to land are discriminatory patriarchal practices, which have a greater impact on women who are not married and women with disabilities.

Farmland has become the target of speculation by financial institutions and pension funds, especially after the 2007-2008 economic crisis and the collapse of the housing market in the United States.¹ As a 2015 report entitled "Foreign Pension Funds and Land Grabbing in Brazil" points out, "The surge in food prices and the financial crisis, which both erupted at the end of 2007, convinced many top private equity funds, banks and other financial firms that farmland can provide a secure new asset class with high returns on investment."²

Pension funds play a central role in this market, with increasing investments in farmland. By 2013, they amount to \$5-15 billion USD and this number doubled by 2015, with numerous pension funds having made their first farmland investments at that time.³ Speculation on farmland poses many dangers for small farmers and rural communities. By funding large-scale purchases of land and

¹ Fabio T. Pitta and Maria Luisa Mendonça, Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos (2015) "A Empresa Radar S/A e a Especulação com Terras No Brasil". English version: "Foreign pension funds and land grabbing in Brazil," GRAIN/ Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos <https://www.grain.org/article/entries/5336-foreign-pension-funds-and-landgrabbing-in-brazil>.

² "Foreign pension funds and land grabbing in Brazil," GRAIN / Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos, <https://www.grain.org/article/entries/5336-foreign-pension-funds-and-land-grabbing-in-brazil>.

³ "Pension funds: key players in the global farmland grab," GRAIN, <https://www.grain.org/e/4287>.

promoting the expansion of mono-cropping of agricultural commodities, these companies cause destruction of biodiversity and pollution of water sources.

The increase in farmland prices and the expansion of mono-cropping of agriculture commodities intensify displacement of peasant and indigenous communities, migration to urban areas, poverty, and unemployment. Financial, agribusiness corporations and a number of countries are pursuing the acquisition of farmland around the globe, while farming and pastoral systems that produce food for local markets are being destroyed, causing a profound impact on climate change.

Speculation with agriculture commodities increases the price of food, which has a disproportional impact on low-income women who spend a larger percentage of their income with basic needs. Urban women usually take the responsibility for providing food and administering the food budget in their households.

Women peasant and farmworkers are responsible for the production of more than 50% of the world's food, but they own less than 2% of farmland and represent 70% of people facing hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity globally⁴. The production of food for subsistence and for local markets is frequently ignored in official economic data despite its central role for generating income, economic development, employment and food security in rural areas.

For women in rural communities, the main challenge to achieve food security and food sovereignty is control over economic resources and access to land. Women's movements in the countryside advocate to have land titles in their name even if they are not the head of their households. A serious risk for women in rural communities is displacement due to pressure and violence from state agents and private militia groups. Armed conflicts, militarization and repression against rural communities frequently involve control over land, water, mining and other natural sources.

The expansion of agribusiness and mining violates the fundamental right of access to water for human consumption. The pollution of water sources and privatization of water services affect women in particular, who are often responsible for providing water in their households.

These are structural issues that require mandatory policies by States and multilateral institutions, as well as laws and regulations to hold private companies accountable for human rights violations. Facing these challenges, women's movements consistently demand the implementation of their right to land, natural resources, housing, inheritance, specific land redistribution policies, educational opportunities, equal representation in decision-making, as well as livelihood-related resources, recognizing their diversity and distinct forms of land tenure systems, including protection of cultural rights of Indigenous communities.

Rural women's organizations demand support for small scale agriculture and women's cooperatives, as well as the right to choose what type of agriculture system they prioritize. This includes inputs and technical assistance based on ecological practices, which determines not only access to food, but the quality of the food they produce. Governments need to provide special lines

⁴ Monsalve, Sofía, "The right to land and other natural resources in the United Nations Declaration on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas" (Dec 2015) *FIAN International briefing*, available at: http://www.fian.org/library/publication/publication_of_a_series_of_briefings_on_peasants_rights

of credit and subsidies that prioritize small farmers who produce healthy food for local markets, as well as other key resources such as transportation and energy. Women's organizations also demand that governments implement legislation to guarantee environmental protection of biodiversity and water sources.

Extensive mono-cropping of agricultural commodities cannot be sustainable. This system is based on chemical inputs and fossil fuels, constituting a major cause of climate change. In addition, monopoly over land does not allow for the development of diversified economic activities, which can generate social and environmental stability.

Especially in Europe and in the United States there is a growing awareness in public opinion about the need to support small scale, local and ecological agriculture. In order to expand this movement internationally we need to increase solidarity between women's organizations in the Global North and the Global South, as well as in urban and rural areas in support of affordable production of healthy food to benefit low-income women in rural and urban areas. We need strong alliances to transform our food system, to guarantee the right to food, labor rights and environmental protection.

Women farmworkers in Brazil: summary of a case study

Monopoly over land and market speculation increases food prices, affecting low-income women disproportionately. The case of Brazil illustrates this situation, since it has one of the highest levels of land concentration in the world. Currently, there is an increasing re-concentration due to international financial speculation in rural land markets⁵. This process increases monopoly over land and expands mono-cropping of commodities for export, causing environmental destruction and displacement of rural communities that produce the majority of food for internal markets⁶.

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 30% of households face a situation of food insecurity in the country. At the same time, the census by IBGE shows that small farmers are responsible for 70% of food production, and for 83% of job creation in the countryside, but occupy only 20 percent of agricultural land. In recent years, there has been a greater degree of market concentration, particularly in agriculture and energy sources, such as land, water, mining, and oil. Large corporations receive the majority of State credit at subsidized interest rates⁷.

In this context, the resistance of rural women is crucial to deal with the simultaneous economic, ecological and food crises. Women in rural and urban centers face specific challenges in times of crisis, since they usually take the main responsibility for social tasks in their households, such as providing food and health care. Therefore, policy proposals to cut governmental support for social programs and the increase in food prices mean an extra burden for working women. In addition, the displacement of rural communities forces women into the worst jobs on plantations and in urban areas⁸.

⁵ Mendonça, Maria L; Pitta, Fábio T.; Xavier, Carlos V. *The Sugarcane Industry and the Global Economic Crisis*. São Paulo: Editora Outras Expressões, 2012.

⁶ Mendonça, Maria L; Pitta, Fábio T.; Xavier, Carlos V. *Transnational Corporations and Agrofuels Production in Brazil*. São Paulo: Editora Outras Expressões, 2014.

⁷ <http://www.agricultura.gov.br/pap>.

⁸ <https://www.social.org.br/revista-monopolio.pdf>

The stories of Brazilian farmworkers are repeated by many generations all over the country, as Maria Souza, from Pernambuco state, explains: “I started working at 11 years old to help my mother in the fields, when she was pregnant. My mother got very sick and died when she was 59. I’m 42 now and I think the same will happen to me”. In the state of São Paulo, Lusiane dos Santos describes a similar situation: “I’m 38 years old and started cutting sugarcane when I was 20. I had to stop going to school because my father left us and my mother sent me to work”.

Carlita da Costa is the president of the Cosmópolis Rural Workers Union, in the state of São Paulo. In a field dominated by men, Carlita has been able to lead one of the strongest rural unions in Brazil. She started cutting sugarcane at a young age in order to provide for her three children. She was able to form a union to struggle for labor rights, and continues to focus on organizing women. But she knows that in order to overcome their situation of poverty and oppression, they need to demand structural changes in the land and food systems.

“It’s common to hear coughs and screams in the cane fields. We have to inhale pesticides and the ash from burned cane. Once I fell and felt the taste of blood in my mouth. I broke my arm and could not work anymore. I have lung problems and feel sick from that horrible work. I saw that cane cutting was killing me,” says Carlita.

The agricultural model of mono-cropping and land concentration reduces the alternatives for peasants to sustain themselves. Many men migrate to different regions in the country, looking for seasonal jobs at plantations or construction, and some never return to their families. For women it’s more difficult to find an alternative, so they usually stay with the responsibility of caring for their children and elderly parents. However, some women migrate in search of jobs, as in the case of Ana Célia: “I’m 24 years old and I came from Pernambuco to work in São Paulo. The company only pays for 50 kilos of sugarcane a day, even when we cut 60 kilos. My whole body hurts. I need to leave this job because I’m getting sick. The cost of rent, water and electricity is very high, and after paying for everything, there is nothing left from my salary”.

Edite Rodrigues tells us that she is 31 years old and came from Minas Gerais state. “I have three kids and need to support them, but I can’t wait to leave this job. At the end of the day, my body is broken, and I feel like vomiting. But the next day we need to start all over again. The pollution from burning sugarcane is horrible for my lungs, in addition to the effects of pesticides. I make about US \$60 dollars per week, but there is no fixed wage. It depends on how much sugarcane we cut. For women it is much worse than for men because they give us the worst jobs, for less pay. We depend on food stamps or we go hungry,” says Edite.

Women farmworkers face a dual situation of oppression, since they are responsible for household unrecognized and unpaid labor, including providing food for their families. Ivanusa Ribeiro, who works at a sugarcane plantation in the state of Pernambuco, explains: “I wake up at 2 in the morning to start working at 4am, and I only stop at 3pm. After getting home, I still have a lot of work to do, cleaning the house, cooking for my kids and my husband”.

Nelma dos Santos, who is also from Pernambuco state, says that this situation would only change if the government gave more incentives to agrarian reform and small farmers. She also demands access to an education system that would be meaningful to her life in the countryside. Like many other women peasants, she fears having to migrate to urban centers, where she would face unemployment or exploitation in low-paid jobs.

The continuing land concentration and mechanization of agribusiness make it more difficult for women to find jobs in the countryside, where they receive less pay, suffer humiliation and sexual harassment. Some of their main demands are regular working hours, equal pay, maternity leave, access to health care, child care and social benefits.

Odete Mendes, who works at a plantation in São Paulo, says that she cuts about 10 tons of sugarcane per day, but only earns US\$100 dollars per week. She pays half of her salary on rent for a very small room, and has to cover all other expenses at her house. “I cannot stay in this job. It’s very hard. Once I broke my arm, I constantly feel a lot of pain in my hands, my lungs suffocate, and sometimes I think I will die in the fields”, says Odete.

These testimonies illustrate the importance of women’s rural movements that advocate for agrarian reform and common use of natural resources, including collective land rights. Large landowners’ monopoly over land prevents other economic sectors from developing, stimulating migration and submitting women farmworkers to degrading conditions. Women’s grassroots movements are promoting a new agricultural system based on local cooperatives and ecological food production.

International human rights mechanisms:

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and UN Special Rapporteurs have established standards and recommended human rights protection for rural women. Multiple mandate-holders from the UN Special Procedures have addressed land related human rights issues relevant to women⁹.

CEDAW 2016 General Recommendation on Rural Women establishes women’s rights to productive resources including land use, ownership and inheritance. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights establishes that states have an obligation to “respect, protect, and guarantee” the right to food. States must guarantee the universal right to food by means of concrete actions and measures that protect vulnerable social groups, and provide the means necessary for them to have permanent access to healthy food.

FAO’s Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security recognizes the vulnerability of rural women and girls who face displacement as a result of land-grabbing. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples establishes protection against dispossession of land, territories and natural resources. UNDRIP establishes procedural protections about the way decisions around land transfers are made in the form of the right to free, prior and informed consent.

The proposed UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas is a priority for women’s rural movements that advocate for gender equality and for international recognition of their right to land, economic and natural resources, ecological agriculture, seeds, water, healthcare and food sovereignty¹⁰.

⁹ For example, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and the Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living A/HRC/4/18: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/Guidelines_en.pdf.

¹⁰ https://www.escri-net.org/sites/default/files/hlnr_mapping_report.pdf

Summary of recommendations:

For women's rural movements, the first step to achieve rural development and a sustainable livelihood is access to land, supported by appropriate investments in infrastructure, special lines of credit, subsidies, and services such as transportation and energy. Peasant rights movements propose a transformation in the current agriculture system, which is based on extensive mono-cropping of commodities and chemical inputs, with democratization of land and diversification of the rural economy. Their demands include:

- Agrarian reform and access to public and communal lands.
- Democratization of land ownership based on land use criteria, including collective land tenure and social function of land.
- Secure land titles in the name of women even if they are not the head of their households, including inheritance rights of women who become widows, as well as unmarried women, women with HIV-AIDS and with disabilities.
- Recognition and protection of Indigenous territories¹¹.
- Secure land rights, labor rights, social security, healthcare, housing and education for rural women.
- Implementation of labor laws to guarantee regular working hours, equal pay, maternity leave, access to health care, child care and social benefits for women farmworkers.
- Access to subsidies, appropriate infrastructure, technical assistance, credit, and technology for ecological agriculture and diversification of crops for rural women.
- Implementation of legislation to protect the right to food.
- Implementation of policies to regulate international financial markets to prevent speculation with the price of land and food.
- Implementation of policies to address gender discrimination and protect Indigenous, Afro descendant women, and ethnic/religious minorities.
- Ensure women's participation in decision-making regarding land rights, including forests, grazing lands and waterways, and the right to food.
- Create databases to measure the economic contribution of food production for subsistence and for local markets, specifying the role of rural women.

¹¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/IPeoples/FreePriorandInformedConsent.pdf>

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