

International Women's Day in the Brazilian Countryside: New Forms of Political Protest and Resistance

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This paper examines new forms of political protest and resistance carried out by Brazilian peasant women during the celebration of International Women's Day. Since 2006, the Brazilian women of La Via Campesina (International Peasant Movement) have taken radical action in order to reclaim 8 March as an international day of struggle by women workers and to question the political, cultural and economic model of development. Their efforts to break the silence about the social and environmental impact of the expanding 'green desert' created by the eucalyptus monoculture of the big paper companies in Brazil provides a remarkable case of women's subversive agency. Based on the documentary Rompendo o Silêncio (Breaking the Silence), produced by La Via Campesina to record the action taken by 2,000 women on International Women's Day in 2006, as well as interviews with women from the organisation who took part in that event, this study argues that peasant women's radical action provides new insights for the analysis of feminism in Latin America and worldwide. It also demonstrates that through their radical and collective actions, which challenge traditional forms of participation and gender roles, peasant women have become one of the major forces within the current movement campaigning for the development of an agro-ecological and sustainable agriculture in Brazil.

Keywords: women, feminism, La Via Campesina, social movements, green desert, Brazil.

Introduction

This paper analyses new forms of political participation and resistance in the Brazilian countryside, focusing on the action taken by the Brazilian women of La Via Campesina (International Peasant Movement) on International Women's Day since 2006, with the purpose of reclaiming 8 March as a global day of struggle by women workers and using it as an opportunity to criticise the social, cultural, economic and environmental consequences of the hegemonic model of development. La Via Campesina emerged in 1992, becoming an international alliance of peasant and family farm organisations, rural women and indigenous people from the Americas, Asia, Europe and Africa.¹ The

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¹ According to Maria Martinez-Torres and Peter M. Rosset the rise of La Via Campesina must be understood within the process of the state transformation in Latin America and its role in rural areas. The authors state that the origin of La Via Campesina as a global peasant movement was prefigured in Latin America by the establishment in the early 1990s of one of its direct precursors, the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo – CLOC (Latin American Co-ordination of Rural Organisations). Maria Helena Martinez-Torres and Peter M. Rosset, "La Via Campesina: Transnationalizing Peasant Struggle and Hope," in *Latin American Social Movements in the Twenty-First Century: Resistance, Power, and Democracy*, eds. Richard Stahler-Sholk, Harry E. Valden and Glend David Kuenker (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 309.

movement opposes the neoliberal model in which agriculture is a profit-making enterprise with agro-industries monopolizing productive resources.² It proposes an alternative model of agriculture and rural life based on the food sovereignty paradigm,³ which ‘embodies the construction of new rights and the transformation of society as a whole’.⁴ This includes ‘agrarian reform, with limits on maximum farm size and equitable local control over resources, such as seeds, land, water, and forests’ as well as an emphasis on social justice (ethnic, racial and gender equity).⁵ The Brazilian peasant women involved in La Via Campesina have played an important role at a local, national and international level. Many of them participated in earlier related social movements in Latin America, notably the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), which was officially formalised in 1984, and the Peasant Women’s Movement (MMC), which has been at the vanguard for women’s gender demands since the mid-1980s.

The struggle for democratisation has been a marked feature in Latin America during the last decades, which has empowered civil society and contributed to the emergence of several social movements. As Jane S. Jaquette asserts, women’s involvement in these social struggles shaped Latin American feminist theory and gave it a distinctive vantage point from which to consider the boundaries between public and private, to discuss how women’s participation in politics can bring about social changes and negotiate political images and discourses.⁶ However, although women’s political participation in Latin America has been widely studied, the political agency of rural women has been largely neglected in mainstream feminist analysis, with a few exceptions.⁷ According to Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena León, the theoretical focus of Latin American and international feminists has been on issues of recognition rather than redistribution. Deere and León claim that this kind of gender analysis shifts the concept of justice away from issues of class, political economy and redistribution towards the cultural sphere. They emphasise the need to connect material

² One of the major reasons for the rise, consolidation and dynamism of rural social movements in the last three decades, argue Carmen Diana Deere and Frederick S. Royce, is the ‘unprecedented attack on rural livelihoods unleashed by neoliberal globalisation’, in combination with the ‘substantial growth in the capacity and political space for rural organising, including transnationally’. Carmen Diana Deere and Frederick S. Royce, “Introduction,” in *Rural Social Movements in Latin America: Organizing for Sustainable Livelihoods*, eds. Carmen Diana Deere and Frederick S. Royce (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 5.

³ Martinez and Rosset, “La Via Campesina,” 313.

⁴ Rajeev Patel, “Global Fascismo, Revolutionary Humanism and the Ethics of Food Sovereignty,” *Development* 48 (2005): 81

⁵ Martinez and Rosset, “La Via Campesina,” 314.

⁶ Jane S. Jaquette, *The Women’s Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

⁷ For example, see Sonia E. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women’s Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Nikki Craske, *Woman and Politics in Latin America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1999); Susan Franceschet, *Women and Politics in Chile* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005); Jaquette, *The Women’s Movement*; Maxine Molyneux, “Mobilization without Emancipation? Women’s Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua,” *Feminist Studies* 11 (1985): 227–254; Georgina Waylen, *Engendering Transitions Women’s Mobilization, Institutions, and Gender Outcomes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

demands, particularly the issue of property, with issues of recognition, in order to transform gender relations and end women's subordination to men.⁸

Whilst the US and European feminist movements had some influence, Brazilian feminism was mainly shaped by the struggle against the military regime (1964-1985).⁹ As Céli Pinto argues, this feminism, considered a *petit bourgeois* issue, emerged in a context of deep inequality with a desire for the re-establishment of democracy.¹⁰ As a result, the Brazilian feminist movement struggled for universal human rights, including women's rights. Pinto emphasises that one distinct characteristic of the feminist movement in the 1980s was women's massive and organised participation during the process of drafting and approval of the Brazilian Constitution (1988). From the 1990s onwards, feminism changed in Brazil, as in other parts of Latin America, Europe and the United States. Two important aspects of this change include firstly a growing chasm between feminist ideals and the movement on the ground and secondly the process of 'NGOisation', as described by Alvarez.¹¹ These changes had an enormous impact on feminism. On the one hand, gender issues became part of the state policy agenda, but on the other, women's issues were dealt with through NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisation), rather than via social movements and a wider mass struggle.

This case study of La Via Campesina adds another facet to this account of Brazilian feminism: the organisation and leadership position of peasant women. Despite the influence that the feminist movement has exerted on rural women's organisations, feminist history has neglected the achievements of rural women. Nowadays, the rural women's movements are not only one of the most rooted movements, with a complex organisational structure and capacity for mobilisation, but they also declare that their struggle comes from a feminist and class conscious stand point.¹² Here, I argue that analysing women's subversive agency during the celebration of International Women's Day can offer new insights for the theorisation of feminism in Latin America and worldwide. This article focuses on the main reasons for women's radical action and how it effects a feminist agenda within the peasant social movement. My analysis is based on the documentary *Rompendo o Silêncio (Breaking the Silence)*, produced by La Via Campesina, and on interviews with women from the organisation who took part in the remarkable occupation of the Aracruz Celulose eucalyptus plantation on International Women's Day in 2006.¹³ Through oral history, 'the first kind of history',

⁸ Carmen Diana Deere and Magdalena León, *Empowering Women: Land and Property Rights in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 9.

⁹ For example, the decade of women and the International Women's Year in 1975 played an important role in Brazilian feminism. Céli Regina Jardim Pinto, *Uma história do feminismo no Brasil* (São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2003); Cynthia A. Sarti, "O feminismo brasileiro desde os anos 1970: Revisitando uma trajetória," *Revista Estudos Feministas* 12 (2004): 35–50.

¹⁰ Pinto, *Uma história do feminismo no Brasil*.

¹¹ Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy*.

¹² Nalu Faria, "Economia feminista e agenda de luta das mulheres no meio rural," in *Estatísticas rurais e a economia feminista: um olhar sobre o trabalho das mulheres*, ed. Andrea Butto (Brasília: NEAD, 2009), 11-30.

¹³ The fieldwork, carried out in 2011 in the southern region of Brazil, formed part of the research for my PhD. Sonia F. Schwendler, "Women's Emancipation through Participation in Land Struggle: Brazil and Chile" (PhD diss., University of London, 2013).

this research aims to capture the subjective dimension of the individual's life and experience, expressed in close connection with their historical and socio-cultural environment.¹⁴ I interviewed women and men of different ages, ethnicities, political participation and work experience who belonged to the Landless Workers Movement (MST) and to the Peasant Women's Movement (MMC). One of the major themes that came out during the interviews, particularly in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, was women's new forms of protest during the celebration of International Women's Day. In order to analyse this phenomenon, this article considers the individual narratives of those women who participated in the occupation of the Aracruz Celulose (both the participants and organisers), and their interconnections with other interviewees who mentioned this topic.

Women's Political Agency: New Forms of Political Protest and Resistance

The genesis of the rural women's movements occurred during the national struggle for democracy undertaken in the 1980s and the consolidation of the feminist and women's movement in Brazil.¹⁵ Peasant women entered the political arena at a time of campaigning for democracy, constitutional rights and agrarian reform, particularly during the redrafting of the federal constitution during the 1980s.¹⁶ Maria J. Carneiro argues that the political participation of rural women was driven by two main factors. Firstly, the resistance movement against the increase of land expropriation and rural workers' exploitation; secondly, the emergence of feminist and women's movements, which have contributed to the consciousness-raising movement against oppressive gender ideology.¹⁷ As landless and smallholder women entered political activity because of their status and identity as working-class rural women. Encouraged as equals by organisers who spoke a discourse of gender equality, this awakened to a new kind of political action that questioned their subordinate gender

¹⁴ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also: Jacques L. Marre, "História de Vida e Método Biográfico," *Cadernos de Sociologia* 3 (1991): 89–141; Maria I. P. de Queiróz, *Variações sobre a técnica de gravador no registro da informação viva* (São Paulo: Queiróz, 1991). This study supports Alessandro Portelli's view that 'oral sources are not found, but co-created by the historian' and that the content of oral sources 'depends largely on what the interviewer puts into it in terms of question, dialogue, and personal relationship'. Alessandro Portelli, *A Dialogical Relationship: An Approach to Oral History*, http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/expressions_portelli.pdf (accessed 5 September 2010), 1; Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader* Second Edition, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 39.

¹⁵ Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy*.

¹⁶ The drafting of the new Federal Constitution (1988) instituted women's legal rights and opened up possibilities for the enforcement of these rights. In fact, measures in favour of rural women were introduced into the Constitution due to the strong position of the feminist movement within the state, but the achievement of women's rights in practice depended on the struggle of the rural women's movement. See: Carmen D. Deere and Magdalena León, "Towards a Gendered Analysis of the Brazilian Agrarian Reform," (Occasional paper no. 16, New England Consortium of Latin American Studies. Storrs, University of Connecticut, 1999), 44.

¹⁷ Maria J. Carneiro, "Mulheres no campo: notas sobre sua participação política e a condição social do gênero," *Estudos Sociedade e Agricultura* 2 (1994): 11–22.

status within the church and within the leftist unions and social movements they participated in.¹⁸ The main gender-related demands articulated by these rural women during the 1980s were the incorporation of women into rural unions, the right to have social security benefits (including paid maternity leave), pensions and recognition as rural workers.¹⁹ Deere and León show that at that time, ‘the constitutional guarantees which the women’s movement achieved in Brazil appear unique in the Latin American context’, with it being the first country to extend social security benefits to rural women workers (waged workers, temporary workers and unpaid family workers).²⁰

The autonomous Rural Women Workers’ Movement, the MMTR, which emerged in the south and northeast of Brazil in the mid-1980s, was at the vanguard for women’s gender-related demands. In the state of Rio Grande do Sul, the MMTR was formally created in 1989 during the First State Meeting of Rural Women Workers. It included substantial regional representation and stipulated that the movements be autonomous.²¹ The establishment of the MMTR, however, was not the start of the movement. Women had begun organising a number of years earlier. Anita Brumer, for example, demonstrates that since the late 1970s, the state of Rio Grande do Sul had been the site of one of the major rural women’s mobilisations in Brazil. This was confirmed by one of the oral history interviewees, C. M., one of the former leaders of the movement, who stated that ‘at the weekend, we used to go to the communities to organise women. Usually, we held our meetings after the church services. We discussed women’s rights, including their recognition as rural workers.’²² She also stressed that before the formation of the MMTR, they called their movement *Organização das Mulheres da Roça*, or OMR (Organisation of Rural Women).²³

For those women in the MMTR, participation in the Christian Base Communities (CEBs), the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), rural unions and the MST had served to both raise their gender and class consciousness and increase their leadership experience. Nevertheless, many of these organisations

¹⁸ Lynn Stephen, *Women and Social Movements in Latin America: Power from Below* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 233.

¹⁹ Despite women’s active participation in farming activities, they were understood as ‘housewives’ and as a consequence, they were also denied the right to be members of trade unions. It was assumed that only one member of the family could be a union member, generally the male head of the household. Sonia F. Schwendler, “A participação da mulher na luta pela terra: dilemas e conquistas,” in *Lutas camponesas contemporâneas: condições, dilemas e conquistas* Volume Two, eds. B. M. Fernandes, L.S. de Medeiros, and M. I. Paulilo (São Paulo: UNESP and Brasília: NEAD, 2009), 203-221.

²⁰ Deere and León, *Empowering Women*, 44.

²¹ Anita Brumer, “Gênero e agricultura: a situação da mulher na agricultura do Rio Grande do Sul,” *Estudos Feministas* 12 (2004): 221.

²² The peasants will be cited through initials, in order to preserve their anonymity. All interviews’ quotations were translated from Portuguese to English by the author.

²³ The OMR was officially instituted in 1985. Daiane dos S. Carlos and Isaura I. Conte, “Oito de março de 2006: em defesa da vida, mais um marco na luta das mulheres camponesas,” in *Mulheres, Resistência e Luta: em defesa da vida*, ed. Conceição Paludo (São Leopoldo: Cebi, 2009), 75.

considered gender-specific demands as less important than class-based and economic demands.²⁴ As a result, between 1995 and 2004, women from different social movements came together to create the National Network of Rural Women Workers (ANMTR). Then, in 2004, a number of autonomous rural women's movements, each with a slightly different name, united under a single acronym: MMC (Peasant Women's Movement). They identified their organisation as a peasant, grassroots and feminist movement.

Significantly, women have also participated from the outset in the land occupation undertaken by the Landless Workers Movement (MST).²⁵ According to João Pedro Stédile, the national leader of the MST, there were three crucial factors that contributed to the formation of the landless movement. As well as the socio-economic impact of the changes in agriculture brought about by the military dictatorship in the 1970s and the concurrent struggle for democratisation, there was an ideological challenge to the idea that land rights related only to private property rights, rather than social need, a view point put forward by the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), created in 1975 and based on the principles of Liberation Theology.²⁶

During the confrontational stage of land struggle, women became aware of their class position. At the same time, as a by-product of their political participation, they also faced situations that led them to adding women's rights and gender inequalities to their agenda, since their participation had exposed them to 'new patterns, or geometries, of inclusion and exclusion'.²⁷ Their participation in land struggle and their connection with women's movements and feminist perspectives led them to reflect on gender ideologies and the gendered *habitus* in which they lived.²⁸ A product of history, *habitus* is 'an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures'.²⁹ According to Maxine Molyneux, women's gender interests could develop through *practical gender interests* ('given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labour') and *strategic gender interests* ('derived in the first instance deductively, that is, from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist').³⁰ In order to negotiate gender relations and

²⁴ Stephen, *Women and Social Movements*; Maria Ignes S. Paulilo, "El género y la clase en los movimientos de mujeres agricultoras de Brasil," *Agricultura, Sociedad y Desarrollo* 3 (2006): 175–196.

²⁵ The first instance of land occupation, which led to the formation of the MST, was that of the Macali farm during the military regime on 7 September 1979. 110 families took part in this land occupation. In their organisation and resistance, particularly when the state military police made an attempt to evict the families, women played a major role.

²⁶ João Pedro Stédile, "Raízes" in *Brava Gente: a trajetória do MST e a luta pela terra no Brasil* Third Edition, eds. João Pedro Stédile and Bernardo Mançano Fernandes (São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2005): 15-29.

²⁷ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minnesota: Polity Press, 1999), 214.

²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 133.

³⁰ Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation?", 232-233.

the structures of subordination, peasant women identified their own practical needs, transforming them into strategic interests.³¹

There were three key elements within the MST's support for women's political participation in land struggle. The first was women's involvement in different levels of the movement's internal organisation, followed by their formation of a National Collective of Women within the MST.³² The third element was a commitment to gender parity within MST, which resulted in the stipulation that every base nucleus must be coordinated by one man and one woman. To varying degrees, this measure has been adopted at other levels within MST's structure. Furthermore, whilst it was not a primary demand of the rural women's movement until 2000, women became involved in the land struggle because of demands for agrarian reform to increase their access to land.³³ Such demands for distribution of land to women were introduced for the first time during the 1985 Anoni encampment, the first major mass land occupation carried out by the MST, involving 1500 families.³⁴ In Brazil, constitutional changes in 1988 raised the possibility of joint land title or giving priority to female heads of household (or both). However, this provision became compulsory only in 2003.³⁵

It was during the struggle for agrarian reform and citizenship rights that women acquired their 'political capital', a concept developed by Else Vieira, who used a gendered approach to the various types of capital conceptualised by Bourdieu.³⁶ Peasant women raised their political and gender consciousness and increased their leadership skills through their participation in land struggle and their organisation in the rural women's movement.³⁷ Acting in public spheres, they learnt to take part in political and agricultural discussions and negotiations, to coordinate meetings and group activities, to direct their social movements and to struggle for women's rights within social

³¹ Schwendler, "Women's Emancipation," 48.

³² See Noelle Maria Paule Lechat. *A questão de gênero no Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra: estudo de dois assentamentos no Rio Grande do Sul*. (Ijuí, RS: UNIJUÍ, 1996).

³³ Carmen Diana Deere, "Women's Land Rights and Rural Social Movements in the Brazilian Agrarian Reform," *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3 (2003): 257–288.

³⁴ It was the first time that men or women who were single could be considered eligible for land titles in the agrarian reform programme. Schwendler, "Women's Emancipation through Participation in Land Struggle", 135.

³⁵ Ordinance 981/2003. As a result, women's participation as beneficiaries of agrarian reform increased significantly from the average of 13 percent before 2003 to an average of 25.6 percent between 2003 and 2006. Andrea Butto and Karla Emmanuela R. Hora, "Mulheres e reforma agrária no Brasil," in *Mulheres na reforma agrária: a experiência recente no Brasil*, eds. Adriana Zarzar Lopes and Andrea Butto (Brasília: MDA, 2010), 19-38.

³⁶ Else R. P. Vieira. "Marcos Históricos na Trajetória das Mulheres na Política Brasileira" (lecture given at the Seminar Mulheres na Política Brasileira at Queen Mary University of London, London, U.K., 24 September 2010).

³⁷ Deere and León show that several female leaders of the Landless Workers Movement took part in the foundation of the National Network of Women Rural Workers (ANMTR) in 1995 and then in 1996 they organised the formation of the Coletivo Nacional de Mulheres (National Collective of Women) as they were not sufficiently represented in the MST leadership and were discriminated against with regard to land distribution. Deere and León, "Towards a Gendered Analysis of the Brazilian Agrarian Reform," 21-22.

movements, unions, political parties and the state. They participated in a range of different activities that challenged traditional assumptions about the rightful place of men and women. As a result, many peasant women, with little formal education and without previous political capital, have become key leaders in the struggle for agrarian reform and women's land rights.

Women's participation in the struggle for land and for women's rights has not only challenged traditional gender roles, but also given them experience of public leadership. According to Sylvia Walby, such gender transformations can be seen as a spiral of effects; greater public participation in one sphere leads to greater public participation in another.³⁸ Nevertheless, changes affect women differently according to their class position, ethnicity, and generation, their role within social struggles and different forms of household organisation. Leonilde Medeiros notes that women's perception of subordination does not emerge immediately from involvement in struggle, but is related to the process of participation and to the creation of conditions that contribute to the denaturalisation of masculine domination and to the rearrangement of their gender roles.³⁹ Medeiros also highlights that the reorganisation of gender roles is more visible and permanent with women who take on leadership positions and have access to theoretical analysis.⁴⁰ Anita Brumer and Gabriele dos Anjos emphasise that when peasant women take on permanent roles in the public sphere, their leadership position is mediated by technical, organisational, bureaucratic and political knowledge, in comparison to those who only have transitory participation in social struggle.⁴¹

The politicisation of agrarian and gender issues, together with an understanding of class struggle strategies and leadership practices, has been fundamental to peasant women leading protests and land occupations. Renata Gonçalves argues that in Pontal do Paranapanema, a region of São Paulo where there have been land conflicts, when men were arrested, it was the women who organised protests and land occupations. By doing this, they showed resistance, strength and improvement in the practice of leadership.⁴² Furthermore, during my 2011 fieldwork in Brazil, I observed that

³⁸ Sylvia Walby, *Gender Transformation* (Routledge: London, 1997).

³⁹ Leonilde S. de Medeiros, "Assentamentos rurais e gênero: temas de reflexão e pesquisa," in *Mulheres na reforma agrária: a experiência recente no Brasil*, eds. Adriana Zarzar Lopes and Andrea Butto (Brasília: MDA, 2010), 11-12.

⁴⁰ It is important to consider that many leaders of the peasant social movements developed their knowledge only through practical experience and teaching organized by social movements. However, this pattern is changing for the new generation of leaders, who in addition have more access to formal education, including a degree, provided either by the state or by state educational programmes, organised through the partnership between universities and social movements. This is the case with the National Programme of Education in Agrarian Reform (PRONERA). Founded in 1998, this programme was institutionalised on 04 April 2010 as state policy in order to provide peasants with access to professional education and address the ongoing issue of illiteracy in the countryside.

⁴¹ Anita Brumer and Gabriele dos Anjos, "Relações de gênero em assentamentos: a noção de empoderamento em questão," in *Mulheres na reforma agrária: a experiência recente no Brasil*, eds. Adriana Zarzar Lopes and Andrea Butto (Brasília: MDA, 2010), 226.

⁴² Renata Honório Gonçalves, "Vamos acampar: a luta pela terra e a busca pelo assentamento de novas relações de gênero no MST do Pontal do Paranapanema" (PhD diss., Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2005).

women were leading the MST's mass struggle, particularly in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. Additionally, women have been struggling for land rights, gender parity in participation and representation, and for the incorporation of gender issues in debates of agricultural policies at local, national and international levels: 'They are undertaking collective action in the field of production, which is not the traditional space that women are used to'.⁴³

Rural women have played a vital role in agricultural production and community organisation. Nevertheless, in most countries peasant and farm organisations are still very male-dominated.⁴⁴ With the naturalisation of the hierarchic sexual division of labour, it has become socially accepted that only men decide about production and selling their products, which leads to women's economic dependence, their confinement to the domestic sphere and their involvement in activities considered female spaces.⁴⁵ Susie Jacobs shows that in many societies, women's work in agriculture, craft production and processing of crops is essential to the smallholder economy. Generally, this work is considered 'reproductive labour', less valuable socially and directed by the 'head of the household'. Besides, 'households headed by women are not considered proper families. Female headed households were, at least until recently, often neglected when policies were formulated'.⁴⁶

Considering this context, women's political intervention in issues of agricultural production, including the occupation of the Aracruz Celulose factory on 8 March 2006, can be considered a subversive action both in terms of class and gender. In fact, the ANMTR's decision in 2000 to reclaim International Women's Day as a symbol of peasant women's struggle against the capital and agribusiness, without denying their specific needs, has been regarded as a major step towards the enhancement of gender equality and the achievement of feminist demands.⁴⁷ Since then, rural organisations have organised numerous similar actions and put forward public policies for a peasant-driven model of agriculture through La Via Campesina. As a local/global movement, La Via Campesina has become one of the most dynamic social movements in the world. Its Rio Grande do Sul section was formally established during the World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre, in 2001.

Breaking the Silence through Subversive Actions

A remarkable example of women's subversive agency was their action to 'break the silence' about the social and environmental impact of the growing 'green desert' generated by the eucalyptus monoculture created by the paper companies in Latin America's largest country. The monoculture production of eucalyptus, which has become the predominant form of industrial forestry development, is causing a large number of conflicts worldwide between companies and local

⁴³ Interview, J. S., regional leader MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

⁴⁴ Annette A. Desmarais, "The International Women's Commission of La Via Campesina," in *The Women, Gender and Development Reader* Second Edition, eds. Naline Visvanthan, Lynn Duggan, Laurie Nisonoff and Nan Wiegersma (London: Zed Books, 2011), 408-413.

⁴⁵ Gonçalves, "Vamos acampar," 274-275.

⁴⁶ Susie Jacobs, *Gender and Agrarian Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 32.

⁴⁷ Interview, I. M., National Coordination of the MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

populations, and embodies one of the most controversial issues of sustainability.⁴⁸ According to James Goodman and Ariel Salleh, ‘the classic social tension between centre and periphery is now complemented by an ecological tension between the prioritisation of nature for commodity production versus prioritisation of nature for the reproduction of livelihood’.⁴⁹

On 8 March 2006 (International Women’s Day), approximately 2,000 peasant women from La Via Campesina entered the Barba Negra farm, Aracruz Celulose’s main production unit of eucalyptus and pine seedlings, in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, in the municipality of Barra do Ribeiro near Porto Alegre. Once inside the farm, the women destroyed greenhouses and thousands of eucalyptus saplings. Their actions generated controversy in Brazilian society, characterizing an ongoing struggle between on the one hand peasants and indigenous communities and, on the other, agribusiness. This kind of conflict is a growing phenomenon in the Global South. However, what is new and noteworthy about this demonstration is that this event was carried out only by women. In Julien-Francois Gerber’s 2011 study of fifty-eight cases of conflict over industrial tree plantations in the Global South, the occupation of the Aracruz Celulose plantation in Rio Grande do Sul was the only example where the protesters were solely women, although he shows that women have been prominent in initiating and/or sustaining resistance in about 10 percent of the listed conflicts.⁵⁰

Gerber also found that the major cause of resistance ‘is related to corporate control over land resulting in displacements and the end of local uses of ecosystems as they are replaced by monocultures’.⁵¹ Likewise, the main purpose of La Via Campesina women’s protest was ‘to denounce the social and environmental impact of the growing green desert created by eucalyptus monoculture’.⁵² This stance is clear in their testimonies quoted in the documentary *Rompendo o Silêncio (Breaking the Silence)*, produced by La Via Campesina in 2006 in order to explain the main reasons for their actions, as their demands were not heard in the official media:

The women from La Via Campesina chose this place because it is one of the greatest threats and the face of agribusiness, especially in our state. There are millions of seedlings, millions of dollars of public money being invested for the benefit of these entrepreneurs. We would like to understand how it is that if there is not enough money to invest in peasant agriculture, how there is so much money for the large plantations of eucalyptus, pine, or acacia, which are merely for the production of cellulose? We would like to put on the government and society’s

⁴⁸ Julien-Francois Gerber, “Conflicts over Industrial Tree Plantations in the South: Who, how and why?” *Global Environmental Change* 21 (2011): 165-176.

⁴⁹ James Goodman and Ariel Salleh, “The ‘Green Economy’: Class Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony,” *Globalizations* 10 (2013): 414.

⁵⁰ Gerber, “Conflicts,” 171

⁵¹ Gerber, “Conflicts,” 165.

⁵² La Via Campesina. *Rompendo o Silêncio (Breaking the Silence)* documentary film (La Via Campesina: São Paulo, 2006).

agenda the discussion of where money is invested. Whether it generates food or materials for export, or for investments only.⁵³

We entered the Aracruz Celulose Company, because it has occupied our land, particularly in Rio Grande do Sul. There are more than 250,000 hectares of land with eucalyptus. And we know that eucalyptus trees generate the green desert, and the degradation of the soil, and a lack of water. Because of this we occupied. We also occupied in solidarity with the indigenous people of Espírito Santo who had their land expropriated by the Aracruz Celulose Company.⁵⁴

Several agencies, including the World Bank and United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), have promoted the expansion of fast-wood plantations in the Global South. Governments have granted the private sector incentives and subsidies, such as forestation grants, investments in infrastructure, preferential taxes and, more recently, the Climate Change Convention and emergence of the carbon sequestration market.⁵⁵ Three other factors have aided the development of a cellulose production chain in the Global South: namely access to large amounts of low-cost land, an inexpensive labour force and the lack of environmental legislation.⁵⁶

Some forty years ago, at the time of the ‘green revolution’, Brazil became the first developing country to establish large-scale fast-wood plantations.⁵⁷ Aracruz Celulose S.A. was established in 1972, but it began operating under the name of Aracruz Florestal in the state of Espírito Santo in 1967, during Brazil’s military dictatorship (1964-1985). From the 1980s onwards, the company expanded its eucalyptus plantations to the state of Bahia, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul. Based on evidence from Aracruz’s 2003 social and environmental report, Alacir De’Nadai et al demonstrate that the company officially owned 375,000 hectares, of which 247,000 hectares were used for planting eucalyptus. In addition, it maintained ‘forestry advancement’ contracts (the planting of eucalyptus on third party property) over 58,000 hectares and 2,593 farmers. As the world’s largest producer of bleached eucalyptus pulp (2.4 million tons per annum), the company exports 97 percent of its production, mainly to Europe (38 percent) and North America (36 percent).⁵⁸

In 2009, Aracruz Celulose S.A. merged with Votorantim Celulose e Papel S.A. (VPC), forming Fibria. The company’s logo is a green leaf, a new “image” that represents Fibria’s commitment to planting

⁵³ Interview, MMC, La Via Campesina, quoted in *Rompendo o Silêncio*.

⁵⁴ Interview, MST, La Via Campesina, quoted in *Rompendo o Silêncio*.

⁵⁵ Gerber, “Conflicts,” 167.

⁵⁶ Luiz Alberto Morelli, “A monocultura do eucalipto e a monopolização do território na metade sul do Rio Grande do Sul” (PhD diss., Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2011), 12.

⁵⁷ Gerber, “Conflicts,” 166.

⁵⁸ Alacir De’Nadai et al, “Promises of Job and destruction of Work: The case of Aracruz Celulose in Brazil,” *World Rainforest Movement* 2 (2005), 9.

forests, renewable raw material and the preservation of native forests.⁵⁹ However, this positive image marketed by the company contrasts with the history of community resistance and criticism from environmentalist NGOs and rural social movements, who created the Rede Alerta contra o Deserto Verde (Alert Against the Green Desert Network) in 1999. Rede Alerta contra o Deserto Verde voiced various demands, including the implementation of the agrarian reform, the restitution of land to indigenous communities, Quilombolas (a resident of a Quilombo, a Brazilian hinterland settlement founded by people of African origin, normally escaped slaves) and communities of small farmers, support for local food production and the conservation of natural resources.⁶⁰

Based on testimonials from hundreds of Indians, Quilombolas and small farmers, De’Nadai et al reported that Aracruz’s occupation of 375,000 hectares of land has not only led to the displacement of thousands of families from the countryside, including Tupinikim and Guarani Indians, Quilombolas, small farmers, sharecroppers and landless rural workers, but also to the destruction of thousands of hectares of Atlantic Forest, which were replaced by eucalyptus. Industrial tree plantations, particularly in the coastal areas, are likely to have a negative impact on peasant or indigenous populations who live nearby since they eradicate most of the ecological goods and services provided by forests.⁶¹ Generally, the net effect on biodiversity is harmful as the fast-wood plantations supply a less suitable habitat for flora and fauna than the ecosystems they replace, which might be damaged by the use of pesticides.⁶²

Between 1968 and 1973, the company destroyed hundreds of thousands of hectares of native forest belonging to the Tupiniquin and Guarani tribes in Espírito Santo, isolating them inside their own territory. Previously, there were more than forty indigenous communities with over 30,000 hectares of land, but the state regarded the land as ‘vacant’.⁶³ Following the arrival of the company, only three communities and forty hectares remain. There were about 1,500 indigenous people living there; today, there are only 680.⁶⁴ As a leader of the Guarani community notes in relation to the company’s impact on their livelihood and way of life: ‘We didn’t lack food in the past as we do today. After they planted eucalyptus there were no animals to hunt, no forest, there is nothing to feed us in the forest. There is no good waterfall because they poisoned it all’.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Fibria, www.fibria.com.br/eb/en/institucional/onde.htm, (accessed 9 April 2012).

⁶⁰ Industrial tree plantation conflicts ‘represent a new and notable point of convergence between agrarian and environmental movements’. Gerber, “Conflicts,” 174.

⁶¹ Gerber, “Conflicts,” 2011.

⁶² Mitschka J. Hartley, “Rationale and Methods for Conserving Biodiversity in Plantation Forests,” *Forest Ecology and Management* 155 (2002): 81–95.

⁶³ Klítia Loureiro, “A instalação da empresa Aracruz Celulose S/A e a “moderna” ocupação das terras indígenas Tupiniquim e Guarani Mbya,” *Revista Ágora* 3 (2006): 21.

⁶⁴ La Via Campesina, *Rompendo o Silêncio*.

⁶⁵ Interview, Indigenous leader, quoted in *Rompendo o Silêncio*.

Since 1978 the indigenous communities have been struggling to recover their land.⁶⁶ In January 2006, those who had reclaimed 11,009 hectares of traditional Tupinikim land which had come under the control of Aracruz were violently evicted by the federal police, who used Aracruz's machinery for the destruction of the indigenous houses:

We are the owners of 18,000 hectares and of what the companies stole from us. And they want to say that now we should stop our struggle. The women are here for this. Because there was a time when the company told us the limits of where we could go and today we will say where the company can come and where we can go. Here, there are 11,000 hectares; this is not for them but for the indigenous communities.⁶⁷

Similarly, the arrival of the company led to the displacement of many descendants of Africans who had escaped from colonial slavery (quilombolas). In the mid-1970s, before the arrival of Aracruz in the north of Espírito Santo, there were around 12,000 families in the territory of 256,000 hectares. Currently, only 1,300 families have resisted, forming thirty-two maroon communities.⁶⁸

Octavio Ianni points out that the history of land in Latin America, evident in the history of agrarian movements, reflects different modes of intensive and extensive capitalist development in the countryside.⁶⁹ In this context, the history of land expropriation is only 'one side of the capital accumulation process. This is combined with labour subjugation'.⁷⁰ For instance, the 'aggressive policy of acculturation' implemented during the military government forced the indigenous and former slave communities into an 'Outgrower Scheme' agreement with Aracruz Celulose.⁷¹ The 'Outgrower Scheme' is a new global strategy adopted by companies in this sector to incorporate farmers into the agribusiness of eucalyptus and cellulose.⁷² A similar situation can be observed in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Sergio Schneider describes the evolution of tree cultivation, in which the acacia has become an alternative crop for family farmers, as a substitute for diversified agricultural farming. In order to accumulate capital, these industries have decentralised their

⁶⁶ In 1996, studies by the National Indian Foundation FUNAI (Brazilian Foundation for Indian Affairs) identified in 18,000 hectares in the area where Aracruz was operating as indigenous land. However, 11,009 hectares were still owned by the Aracruz Celulose Company until 2010, when the demarcation of the indigenous land (18,154 hectares) was ratified by the Brazilian Government (DOU 08/11/2010). CIMI, <http://www.cimi.org.br/site/pt-br/?system=news&action=read&id=2729&page=567>, (accessed 9 April 2012); CIMI, <http://6ccr.pgr.mpf.mp.br/documentos-e-publicacoes/terras-indigenas/dados-gerais-povos-e-terras-indigenas-no-brasil>, (accessed 12 April 2012).

⁶⁷ Interview, Indigenous leader, quoted in *Rompendo o Silêncio*.

⁶⁸ La Via Campesina, *Rompendo o Silêncio*.

⁶⁹ Octavio Ianni, "Revoluções camponesas na America Latina," in *Revoluções camponesas na America Latina*, ed. José Vicente T. dos Santos (São Paulo: Icone; Ed da UNICAMP, 1985), 14-45.

⁷⁰ José de Souza Martins, *Expropriação e violência: a questão política no campo* (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1991), 50-52.

⁷¹ Ianni, "Revoluções camponesas na America Latina," 14-45.

⁷² Winifred Overbeek, "Brazil: The struggle of the Green Desert Network," *Word Rainforest Movement* 101 (2005), <http://www.wrm.org.uy/oldsite/bulletin/101/Brazil.html>, (accessed 15 April 2012).

production units to rural areas, subcontracting the execution of certain steps in the industrial production process. This has not only transformed the agricultural production process, but has also changed the agrarian structure.⁷³ The tree pulp farming industry also followed the same pattern. A community leader settled in the Anoni Farm, in Rio Grande do Sul, pointed out the attempt made by the fast-wood plantation companies to subcontract family farmers to cultivate eucalyptus on their properties. She highlights women's influence on the community decision to reject the implementation of this project in the settlement. She says 'women understand when there is not enough food at home. If we cultivate eucalyptus, then we will only have wood. What are we going to leave for the new generations?'⁷⁴

The expansion of the monoculture of eucalyptus in Rio Grande do Sul since 2003 has generated controversy and resistance, much of which has been led by women. According to Aracruz's 2006 report, the company owned 104,000 hectares in the state: 66,000 designated for the cultivation of tree plantations, 28,000 for forest preservation and the rest for the installation of the factory.⁷⁵ However, the 'forestry advancement' contracts with other farmers were not declared.⁷⁶ If the other companies, Votorantim and Stora Enso, are included, the area covered by eucalyptus in the state was 300,000 hectares in 2006. Furthermore, the companies had planned to expand the tree cultivation to 1,000,000 hectares by 2015.⁷⁷ According to Luiz Morelli, there are opposing elements, family farming and industrial tree plantation, with economic, environmental and territorial concepts polarised around the two. On the one hand, the tree plantation companies have developed research in order to promote a sustainable expansion of eucalyptus monoculture, emphasising the economic and social development of the region. On the other hand, the Landless Workers Movement (MST), and especially La Via Campesina, advocate the development of a peasant household economy, based on land redistribution and the preservation of the Pampa's Biome. La Via Campesina argues that while a company such as Aracruz generates only one job for each 187 hectares planted, small scale farms produce one job for every nine hectares.⁷⁸

The consequences of eucalyptus monoculture are already visible in Rio Grande do Sul.⁷⁹ It has had a major impact in the south of the state, in a region called the 'Half South', home to the Pampa, a unique biome found only in this area; the introduction of exotic trees has impoverished the native

⁷³ Sergio Schneider, "Os colonos da indústria calçadista: a expansão industrial e as transformações da agricultura familiar no Rio Grande do Sul," *Ensaio FEE* 17 (1996): 312.

⁷⁴ Interview, E. S., MST, local leader of the Anoni Settlement, 2011.

⁷⁵ Aracruz's main factory, located in Guaíba, was purchased in 2003 and sold in 2009 to a Chilean company. In 2006, the company announced great investment to expand the industry. Morelli, "A monocultura do eucalipto," 117-118.

⁷⁶ Morelli, "A monocultura do eucalipto," 117-118.

⁷⁷ La Via Campesina, *O latifúndio dos Eucaliptos: informações básicas sobre as monoculturas de árvores e as indústrias de papel* (Rio Grande do Sul: La Via Campesina, 2006).

⁷⁸ La Via Campesina, *O latifúndio dos Eucaliptos*, 13.

⁷⁹ Luiza Chomenko, "Um panorama sobre o cultivo de monocultura de árvores," *Cadernos IHU em formação. A monocultura do eucalipto: deserto disfarçado de verde?* 4 (2008): 38.

biome, thus the label the 'green desert'.⁸⁰ Eucalyptus monoculture has brought about a drop in the water table, impoverished the soil and reduced biodiversity. Although controversial, Gerber's study provided evidence of the eucalyptus monoculture affecting the hydrological and soil conditions, since the eucalyptus tree is an insatiable water consumer and its growth rate depends on its supply. The quality of the surface water also deteriorated due to the regular use of pesticides.⁸¹

In addition, Luiza Chomenko argues that the alteration of the eco-system has an effect on the region's population, disrupting their cultural identity.⁸² This can clearly be seen in the settlements located in the southern Rio Grande do Sul, which are now surrounded by eucalyptus. According to S. M., a settled woman in the Anoni Farm who has taken part in the protests against the expansion in the eucalyptus in years since 2006, 'the cultivation of eucalyptus in a farm of 18,000 hectares, which was previously occupied by the landless workers and designed to be a settlement, has affected the cultivation of sweetcorn by the settled farmers'.⁸³ In addition, rice growing in that area was replaced by tree plantations.⁸⁴ Leonardo Melgarejo observes that the Brazilian Enterprise for Agricultural Research (EMBRAPA), a state-owned company affiliated with the Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture, has identified the settlements as important for the production of food in the municipalities in which they are located.⁸⁵ He argues that the cultivation of eucalyptus can be a profitable business, in the short term. However, the negative impact on peasant farming and the territorial development of the 'Half South' would be irreparable.

Morelli asserts that the appropriation of land by industrial companies followed by the planting forests of eucalyptus leads to cyclical changes, but not to the alteration of the agrarian structure, existing elements of which are maintained. He points to the growing trend in the southern region and parts of Argentina and Uruguay whereby a group of cellulose companies monopolise landownership in certain areas.⁸⁶ Bernardo Mançano Fernandes argues that the increased territorial power of capital means loss, not only of land, but also of social and political power of the peasantry and vice-versa. As capital does not reproduce the peasantry to the same extent as it excludes it, the peasantry re-integrates itself into the economy by means of land occupation. Through the culture of resistance, they have been creating and re-creating a political strategy of struggle for land, against the expropriation and exploitation of the means of production.⁸⁷ Gerber's study identified that

⁸⁰ Chomenko, "Um panorama sobre," 31, 37.

⁸¹ De'Nadai et al., 2005.

⁸² Chomenko, "Um panorama sobre," p. 32.

⁸³ Interview, E. S., MST, local leader of the Anoni Settlement, 2011.

⁸⁴ Miqueline Isabel L. De Faveri, "Desertos verdes: análise documental da cobertura dos jornais Correio do Povo e Zero Hora, de 9 a 18 de março de 2006, sobre a expansão da monocultura de eucaliptos no Rio Grande do Sul," (Undergraduate final paper, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2007), 27.

⁸⁵ Leonardo Melgarejo, "Agricultura x monocultura: o empobrecimento do bioma," *Cadernos IHU em formação. A monocultura do eucalipto: deserto disfarçado de verde?* 4 (2008): 52.

⁸⁶ Morelli, "A monocultura do eucalipto," p. 6.

⁸⁷ Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, "Occupation as a Form of Access to Land," University of Nottingham, <http://www.landless-voices.org>, (accessed 15 November 2011); Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, "Questão

property remains the most important and immediate cause of industrial tree plantation conflicts. Other commonly reported factors include power concentration, displacement, water shortages and the disappearance of natural resources. Gerber underlines that such conflicts are, in fact, reactions against the process of capitalist 'accumulation by dispossession'.⁸⁸ Protesting peasants or indigenous peoples see fast-wood plantations as 'exogenous encroaching agents undermining their access to natural resources and services, whether land, water or biotic resources'. Therefore, they perceive industrial tree plantations as 'threatening their livelihood' and also their 'subsistence ethics'.⁸⁹

Considering themselves historical guardians of life and the natural world and as having primary responsibility for the well-being of their families, peasant women brought the debate on food sovereignty to the protest movement. At an international level, women of La Via Campesina claimed that farming peoples have the 'right to produce [their] own food in [their] own territory'.⁹⁰ Elisabeth Witzel and Maria A. Silveira, members of organization, give evidence that 'as the ones with the major responsibility for food production, women are directly jeopardised by the expansion of eucalyptus monoculture, particularly when they are forced out from the countryside'. In addition, 'the few jobs generated by the tree industry are usually directed to men'.⁹¹ Women's agricultural activities, although usually considered as additional help, have played a major role within peasant economies, assuring food sovereignty and biodiversity.⁹² Feminist economic analysis has drawn attention to this vital contribution. Such analyses also guided protests on International Women's Day. The central demand on La Via Campesina's agenda is an alternative model of agriculture and rural life, based on the 'food sovereignty' paradigm:

food and farming are much more than trade and that, from the perspectives of broad-based and inclusive local and national economic development, production for local and national markets is more important than production for export in terms of addressing poverty and hunger; preserving rural life, economies, and environments; and managing resources in a sustainable fashion.⁹³

The model advocated by La Via Campesina includes various demands such as the adoption of mechanisms that promote fair prices for farmers and consumers alike as well as 'agrarian reform, with limits on maximum farm size and equitable local control over resources, like seeds, land, water,

agrária: conflitualidade e desenvolvimento territorial," in *Luta pela terra, reforma agrária e gestão de conflitos no Brasil*, eds. Antonio Marcio Buainain et al. (Campinas: UNICAMP, 2008), 173-230.

⁸⁸ Gerber, "Conflicts over Industrial Tree Plantations," p. 173.

⁸⁹ Gerber, "Conflicts over Industrial Tree Plantations," p. 173.

⁹⁰ Annete A. Desmarais, "The Via Campesina: Peasant Women on the Frontiers of Food Sovereignty." *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 23 (2003): 142.

⁹¹ Elisabete Witzel and Maria A. Silveira, "Mulheres da Via Campesina," *Cadernos IHU em formação. A monocultura do eucalipto: deserto disfarçado de verde?* 4 (2008): 86.

⁹² Faria, "Economia feminista," p. 24.

⁹³ Martinez and Rosset, "La Via Campesina," p. 313.

and forests'.⁹⁴ However, as Annette Desmarais argues, the main focus of food sovereignty is on the production of food and on those who actually work the land. Therefore it 'goes beyond the common understanding of food security as guaranteeing that an adequate amount of food is produced and made accessible to everyone'.⁹⁵ It must consider what kind of food is produced, where and how it is produced, and on what scale.

The Brazilian women of La Via Campesina articulated this broad perspective intrinsic to the food sovereignty model. After their occupation of Aracruz Celulose, they took the seedlings to the FAO's Second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, held in Porto Alegre, the capital of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. There they stated that 'humanity needs to look after the planet, needs food (rice, beans, and healthy food). It will not survive on cellulose', drawing attention to the negative impact of transnational agribusiness on Brazil's rural areas.⁹⁶ The women of La Via Campesina have, according to Desmarais, also added a human health as another facet of the food sovereignty model, pioneering health as a critique of an agriculture dependant on chemicals, and argued for the development of an ecological and sustainable agriculture.⁹⁷

Drawing on a feminist perspective centred around the struggle for life, peasant women have campaigned for the production of healthy food, the preservation of their traditional wisdom, the conservation of medicinal knowledge and the protection of biodiversity, stating 'as those responsible for the reproduction of life, we struggle to create a healthy life for our children'.⁹⁸ They have strongly opposed the development of an agriculture dependant on chemicals and genetically modified plants. They have also denounced all forms of violence to which rural women are subject:

Rural women lives are affected by the capitalist and patriarchal violence maintaining us at the margins and in the most precarious conditions. We know that the dominant system brings many forms of exclusion and sexist practices that are replicated in our daily lives, in our personal relations and in our political relations, when our knowledge, our work, and our economic contribution is devalued or negated. The patriarchal capitalist model nullifies the possibility of recognition of women's work and the contributions from rural women such as

⁹⁴ Martinez and Rosset, "La Via Campesina," p. 314. For more discussion of the food sovereignty model, see also: Patel, "Global Fascismo," 81; Hen Bernstein, "A dinâmica de classe do desenvolvimento agrário na era da globalização," *Sociologias* 13 (2011): 52–81; Horácio Martins Carvalho, *Na sombra da imaginação: reflexão a favor dos camponeses*. http://www2.fct.unesp.br/nera/artigodomes/5artigodomes_2010.pdf, (accessed March, 2012).

⁹⁵ Desmarais, "The Via Campesina," p. 143.

⁹⁶ Interview, S. K., national leader MMC, La Via Campesina, 2011.

⁹⁷ Desmarais, "The Via Campesina," p. 143. See also: Sofia Monsalve, "Gender and Land," in *Promised Land: Competing Visions of Agrarian Reform*, eds. Peter Rosset, Rajeev Patel, and Michael Courville (Oakland: Food First Books, 2005), 192-207.

⁹⁸ Interview, E. F., local leader MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

the conservation and recreation of our ecosystems, our biodiversity, our health systems and the transmission of agricultural knowledge.⁹⁹

In doing so, they have added issues of gender equality, women's rights and empowerment to the debate about food sovereignty, adding a feminist perspective to the class consciousness that demands structural transformations in society.

The Impact and Outcomes of Women's Radical Actions

By 'breaking the silence' on International Women's Day and during other similar demonstrations, the women of La Via Campesina in all regions of the country have enhanced both their own political agency and their wider visibility. J. S., who has taken part in more than one women-led protest against the eucalyptus companies, points out that when women went to the heart of the capital to criticise the negative effects of the eucalyptus plantation on the environment and human lives, debates on this issue were already in place; what was new was that the protest led only by women.¹⁰⁰ These subversive acts have strengthened women's political role in society, although they also led to women becoming the victims of political repression and legal persecution. Their actions became part of the criminalisation of social movements in Brazil, a process assisted by an alliance between the legislative system and the mass media.¹⁰¹

Cristina Zanella Rodrigues analysed the discourses used in the media's coverage of the Aracruz case. She demonstrates that through the use of biased language and selective imagery, reports marginalised the political and environmentalist demands of the women's protest and focused only on the damage done to Aracruz Celulose.¹⁰² Likewise, Miqueline De Faveri showed that only three of the nineteen articles published by *Correio do Povo* included La Via Campesina's point of view. Similarly, in the ten days after the event, only two intellectuals featured in her sample and both of these were against the demonstration.¹⁰³ Using a clearly capitalist perspective that defends private property, the media portrayed the company as the victim and condemned the women's actions through the use of adjectives such as 'vandalism', 'depredation', 'invasion' and 'destruction'. For example, the peasant women's 'fury' was contrasted with the 'good sense' of Isabel Gonçalves, an Aracruz researcher who claimed that many years of research had been destroyed.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ La Via Campesina, *Greetings from La Via Campesina to the Women of the World*, www.viacampesina.org, (accessed 11 November 2011).

¹⁰⁰ Interview, J. S., regional leader MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

¹⁰¹ Antonio Canuto, "Os movimentos sociais em ação no campo," in *Conflitos no campo Brasil 2009*, eds. Antonio Canuto, Cassia R. Da Silva Luz and Isolete Wichinieski (São Paulo: Expressão Popular, 2010), 142-147.

¹⁰² Cristina Zanella Rodrigues. *"As mudas romperam o silêncio": discurso ecológico e movimento campesino*. (Master Diss., Universidade Católica de Pelotas, 2009), 38-41.

¹⁰³ De Faveri, "Desertos verdes," 64-65.

¹⁰⁴ Maíra Kubík T. Mano, "Deserto verde, imprensa marrom: o protagonismo político das mulheres nas páginas dos jornais" (MA diss., Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 2010), 36.

The stance taken by the media gave voice to the company and ignored the political motivations that led the women to undertake such radical action.¹⁰⁵ Politicians took a similar approach. For instance, the acting governor of Rio Grande do Sul, Antonio Hohlfeldt, described the women's protest as 'provocation and banditry' whilst the Minister of Agrarian Development, Miguel Rosseto, also condemned the event, saying that 'this kind of violent action does not contribute to the agrarian reform project'.¹⁰⁶ By portraying themselves as being representative of mainstream society, both the media and government presented an 'almost consensual' discourse about the women's actions without analysing the environmental impact of the eucalyptus monoculture.¹⁰⁷ As J. S., a regional MST leader, emphasised during one of my interviews: 'the media showed only the damages caused by La Via Campesina, but the harm that the company is causing to our soil, to our nation was not in question'.¹⁰⁸ As a response, La Via Campesina published an introductory textbook in which they refuted the media's accusation that the peasant women destroyed the Aracruz genetic laboratory and twenty years of research, showing it to be a fallacy as the genetic laboratory is in Aracruz in Espírito Santo.¹⁰⁹ La Via Campesina argues mistruths such as this are symbolic of the criminalisation of the peasant social movement.

Both media reporting of the demonstration and political responses also attempted to obscure and deny the women's agency, emphasizing the need to discover 'who is behind the women's action'. This insinuated that the women had been misled and that they acted at men's behest, particularly the Landless Workers Movement's leadership.¹¹⁰ The media, a privileged space, thus reproduced gender inequalities and transmitted hierarchic models of hegemonic masculinities and femininities, which shape and naturalise women's historic position within private and public spheres.¹¹¹ These are not, however, the only reactions to the demonstrations. As N. P., regional leader of the MST in Rio Grande do Sul discusses, the event had a strong effect on both the peasant movement and wider society:

We were criminalised by the government, the media and the judiciary. But it also generated an impact on the whole society. Firstly, there was a terror; some people were against, others in favour. But it brought the theme to the agenda, and this was what we wanted. That people take a position in regard to the consequences of this agricultural model, based on monoculture and land concentration, and its effects on peasant agriculture and agrarian reform. This event also produced many outcomes within peasant movements, particularly; the

¹⁰⁵ Rodrigues, "As mudas romperam o silêncio", 38-39.

¹⁰⁶ Correio do Povo, "Vandalismo prejudica décadas de pesquisa," (Porto Alegre, *Correio do Povo*, 9 March 2006). <http://www.correiodopovo.com.br/Jornal/A111/N160/HTML/> (accessed 12 April 2012); Folha de São Paulo, "Mulheres depredam fábrica de celulose no RS," (São Paulo, *Folha de São Paulo*, 6 March 2006). <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u76373.shtml>, (accessed 12 April 2012).

¹⁰⁷ Rodrigues, "As mudas romperam o silêncio," 41.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, J. S., regional leader MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

¹⁰⁹ La Via Campesina, *O latifúndio dos Eucaliptos*, p. 27.

¹¹⁰ Carlos and Conte, "Oito de março de 2006," p. 157.

¹¹¹ Mano, "Deserto verde," 57.

affirmation of women's feminist and classist stand point. We were already doing this in the struggle for agrarian reform, but alongside our comrades. But an action of this extent surprised our comrades from social movements, not only because of the size, but also the substance that this action generated. To undertake an action of this dimension reveals to our comrades that we are able to direct our struggle.

In particular, the action strengthened the position of women inside the peasant movement, as attested to by male leaders. D. M. states that 'this was one of the most radical actions of past years. And this was decided by the women of the movement [...]. With this action, they transcended men's capacity of manifestations and strength'.¹¹² J. P. also states that 'this is a dispute about the model of agriculture, and women have more perseverance [...]. Nowadays, women are in the front line of the movement. They conquered this space'.¹¹³ As Emma Siliprandi argues, the political mobilisation of rural women has astonished not only wider society and the State, but also rural social movements themselves.¹¹⁴

The occupation of Aracruz thus became a 'symbol of class struggle with a gender perspective; a demonstration of women's organisation, discipline, solidarity and resistance'.¹¹⁵ The women themselves recognise this shift. As one local leader put it 'Now we know that we can direct the social struggle, because we used to wait for men to take the initiative'.¹¹⁶ This has not always been easy. Opposition, particularly confrontation with the police at subsequent events, meant 'many women have become afraid or lost family support because of their participation'.¹¹⁷ At the same time, 'it has created a strong solidarity between women'.¹¹⁸ L. M. adds: 'some women are in a more advanced process, but for others, who are more isolated in the settlements, it is more difficult for their husbands to allow their participation. And it is difficult to raise consciousness without sharing experiences with other women'.

As this quotation suggests, changes to the system of gender relations in the context of land struggle and peasant women's organisation is neither uniform nor continuous.¹¹⁹ Even when peasant women take action in the public sphere, they are still segregated into unequal positions and/or constrained by the burden of women's domestic roles, with those in leadership positions affected differently to other participants. Walby comments on this difference:

¹¹² Interview, D. M., local leader MST, 2011.

¹¹³ Interview, J. P., former national leader MST, 2011.

¹¹⁴ Emma Siliprandi, "Mulheres agricultoras e a construção dos movimentos agroecológicos no Brasil," in *Mulheres camponesas: trabalho produtivo e engajamentos políticos*, eds. Delma P. Neves and Leonilde S. De Medeiros, (Niterói: Alternativa, 2013), 336.

¹¹⁵ Carlos and Conte, "Oito de março de 2006," 158.

¹¹⁶ Interview, E. F., local leader MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

¹¹⁷ Interview, L. V., Anoni Settlement, 2011.

¹¹⁸ Interview, I. L., MST, local leader of the Anoni Settlement, 2011.

¹¹⁹ Sonia F. Schwendler, "The Construction of the Feminine in the Struggle for Land and in the Social Re-creation of the Settlement," University of Nottingham, <http://www.landless-voices.org>, (15 April 2012).

Women who have adapted their lives to a system of private patriarchy, a domestic gender regime, have a different set of resources and vulnerabilities as compared with those who have grown up in the new forms of more public patriarchy, a more public gendered regime. They will have different values and moralities, different political agendas and priorities.¹²⁰

Nor are changes complete. Under 'patriarchal gender regimes', peasant women continue to battle for the recognition that they are able to lead social movements and manage the production of agriculture.¹²¹ They are still struggling for equal opportunities to develop their knowledge and experience and to make their own decisions. They are resisting a social system in which the peasantry has been disempowered and dispossessed in relation to natural resources, access to knowledge and technologies. Yet there is evidence that peasant women are succeeding in creating alternatives to the hegemonic model of agriculture and women's domesticity: 'Through their manifestations, they are coming out of the obscurity and silence of their history'.¹²² Women's position in leading the demonstrations over the years is a turning point that provides new insights for understanding feminism in Latin America and worldwide as well as for interpretations of class struggle. Women from a marginalised social group are challenging international capitalism and the patriarchal model of society. They are claiming a historical connection with Mother Earth and using this to justify their campaign to preserve biodiversity on the planet and secure human emancipation.

International Women's Day has a crucial role in this. For the peasant women of La Via Campesina, the 8 March celebrations bring together gender and class struggle, with a feminist and socialist perspective both present. This reasserts the revolutionary origins of the occasion. According to Nalu Faria, the history of International Women's Day brings the complex struggle for gender equity within the left movements. It also demonstrates the limitations of feminist campaigns if not related to structural transformations in the larger society.¹²³ Comments from I. L., a local MST leader in the Anoni settlement, show that the extent to which peasant women associate the battle against agribusiness with their definition of what 8 March means: 'Women are not only there to discuss feminism, but to make a class struggle. Not from big debates, but from practice. This involves the issue of the technological model of agriculture, based on the use of chemicals and pesticides'.¹²⁴ Women of La Via Campesina, both those in mixed-sex peasant organisations such as the MST and those in the autonomous women's groups, regard their struggle as not only for gender equity and the achievement of women's rights and empowerment, but also for the development of a peasant-driven agriculture and the wider transformation of society:

¹²⁰ Walby, *Gender Transformations*, 11.

¹²¹ Jacobs, *Gender and Agrarian Reform*, 2010.

¹²² Isaura Isabel Conte, "Retalhos de História das mulheres camponesas," *Revista Semina* 8 (2009): 11.

¹²³ Nalu Faria, "Foreword," in *As origens e a comemoração do Dia Internacional das Mulheres*, Ana Isabel Álvarez González, translation by Alessandra Ceregatti et al. (São Paulo: Expressão Popular; SOF – Sempre viva Organização Feminina, 2010), 9-19.

¹²⁴ Interview, I. L., MST, local leader of the Anoni Settlement, 2011.

The peasant women's movement continues to have a crucial role in the struggle for women's liberation and the transformation of society. It is a movement that demands peasant-driven agriculture and agrarian reform. In addition, it has the responsibility to struggle for gender equality, the recognition of women's work and women's capacity because the patriarchal culture continues and it is strong in the countryside.¹²⁵

If we women do not bring our demands to the agenda, no-one will do it, but we do not link our struggle only to our demands. We connect our needs to the development of a project related to food sovereignty, as a principle of social struggle, with political autonomy of the people and of production. Now, there is the debate of the campaign against pesticides, which is a strategic theme, connected to society but it particularly affects our lives as peasant women. The definition of demands that are related to our lives, our agricultural production, our condition of workers and women is a new element in women's struggle.¹²⁶

Through their activism in the peasant movement, these women have developed a new feminist perspective that moves from the grassroots upwards, drawing on liberation theory to link gender equality with class struggle. The various challenges faced by the peasantry are central to this, with the goal to achieve liberation against all forms of oppression, subalternisation and submission.¹²⁷ They are struggling for a simultaneous socialist and feminist revolution. As Conceição Paludo notes, there is no emancipation under the capitalist system, but 'there are emancipatory processes that foster some achievements, denounce the injustice and proclaim possibilities of innovative social, economic, political and cultural relationships: the possibility of human emancipation'.¹²⁸

Activists within the movement openly articulate these links. N. P., a regional MST leader, states 'This action in the Aracruz Celulose generated a quality in class struggle from women's agency, a quality in the feminist position of women. Nowadays, we publically adopt a feminist and classist position'.¹²⁹ This identification of peasant women as feminists is a new phenomenon in Latin America, emerging only with the radical action taken by these demonstrators.¹³⁰ Peasant women are re-signifying feminism within their organisations. This reconceptualization, which they call a 'peasant and popular feminism', comes from social movements strongly connected with the countryside but at the same time related to class struggle and political agency.¹³¹ It has its central focus on the struggle for life against the patriarchal and capitalist systems.

¹²⁵ Interview, J. C., founder member of the Women's Movement, La Via Campesina, 2011.

¹²⁶ Interview I. M., member of the National Coordination of the MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

¹²⁷ Schwendler, "Women's Emancipation," 51.

¹²⁸ Conceição Paludo, *Mulheres, Resistência e Luta: em defesa da vida* (São Leopoldo: Cebi, 2009), 11.

¹²⁹ Interview, N. P., regional leader MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

¹³⁰ Sônia F. Schwendler, "'Without Feminism there is no Socialism': Discourses and Subversive Practices in Latin America," *International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities and Nations*, 11 (2012), 131.

¹³¹ Schwendler, "Without Feminism," 132.

Adding this anti-patriarchal dimension to the historically anti-capitalist stance of the peasant movement is, according to Pamela Caro, new and subversive and has revolutionary potential as it highlights gender inequality within left-wing ideology and organisations.¹³² There is a growing understanding that ‘a strong consciousness of class inequalities does not lead to a similar preoccupation about inequality between genders’.¹³³ P. N., a regional MST leader, points out that ‘the idea that class and feminism are simultaneous struggles is an element that needs to be considered in our struggle’.¹³⁴ Likewise, local MST leader I. L. emphasises that: ‘if we wish to build a different society we need to struggle for this transformation. But class struggle on its own does not lead to gender consciousness-raising. I can be a revolutionary without gender awareness, because it is a cultural issue’.¹³⁵ Or as another MST member forcefully states: ‘When we assume the slogan that “without feminism there is no socialism”, it is not only a motto. It is a political conception, in which feminism is considered as a demand for social movements, of human emancipation, in order to build another possible world’.¹³⁶

Conclusions

As a ‘dynamic force in an ongoing modernisation process’, rather than disappearing, peasant movements recreate themselves through different political strategies and forms of resistance.¹³⁷ Women’s participation in this class struggle and their involvement in the women’s movement at local, national and transnational levels has nurtured their political agency and challenged their understandings of gender. This article has argued that through their radical actions, peasant women have not only brought public attention to the controversial issue of eucalyptus monoculture and its economic, cultural and environmental impact, but have also created a feminist agenda within class struggle. It has shown the strong position that they achieved within the peasant social movement as well as the constraints imposed upon them by ‘patriarchal gender regimes’ in the countryside.¹³⁸

¹³² Pamela Caro, “La transgresión del feminismo campesino y popular: Autonomías y soberanías,” *Autonomía política de las mujeres: algunas reflexiones*, ed. Centro Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género (Santiago de Chile: Regional de Derechos Humanos y Justicia de Género, 2011), 117-142.

¹³³ Paulilo, “El género,” 188.

¹³⁴ Interview, P. N., regional leader MST, La Via Campesina, 2011.

¹³⁵ Interview, I. L., MST, local leader of the Anoni Settlement, 2011.

¹³⁶ I. M., member of the National Coordination of the MST, La Via Campesina, interview, 2011. This slogan was coined during the IV Assembly of the Articulation of Peasant Women from the Latin American Co-ordination of Rural Organisation (CLOC) – La Via Campesina, which was held in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2010.

¹³⁷ James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, “Are Latin American Peasant Movements Still a Force for Change? Some New Paradigms Revisited,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 28 (2001): 92; Deborah Bryceson, Cristóbal Kay and Jos Mooij, eds., *Disappearing Peasantries? Rural Labour in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 2000); Bernardo Mançano Fernandes, “Questão agrária: conflitualidade e desenvolvimento territorial,” 173–230; Sérgio Gómez, “Organización campesina en Chile: reflexiones sobre su debilidad actual,” *Revista Austral de Ciencias Sociales* 6 (2002): 3-18.

¹³⁸ Jacobs, *Gender and Agrarian Reform*, 2010.

The peasant women's actions provide new insights for the analysis of feminism in both Latin America and worldwide. As shown here, their radical collective demonstrations challenge traditional forms of participation and gender roles, transforming them into one of the major proponents for the development of an agro-ecological and sustainable agriculture in Brazil. Through their struggle against agribusiness, they are developing new forms of political participation and, crucially, adding a feminist perspective to the ongoing class struggle. By creating connections between different forms of inequality, they have secured a strong leadership position within the peasant movement and begun the process of envisioning an alternative model of agriculture, society and human relationships.