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## We Are Not All the Same: Taking Gender Seriously in Food Sovereignty Discourse

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## Abstract

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The vision of food sovereignty calls for radical changes in “agricultural, political and social systems related to food”. These changes also entail addressing inequalities and asymmetries of power in gender relations. While women’s rights are seen as central to food sovereignty given the key role women play in food production and procurement, food preparation, family food security and food culture, few attempts have been made to systematically integrate gender in food sovereignty analysis. This paper uses case study evidence from countries where corporate agricultural expansion is on-going to highlight the different ways and wants of incorporation and struggle that take place on the ground depending on women and men’s different position, class and endowments. These, in turn, are contributing to processes of social differentiation and class formation thus to creating rural communities and societies that are much more complex and antagonistic than those sketched in food sovereignty discourse and neopopulist claims of egalitarianism, cooperation and solidarity. We argue that proponents of food sovereignty need to systematically address gender as a strategic element of its construct and not only as a mobilising ideology. We also maintain that if food sovereignty is to have an intellectual future within critical agrarian studies, it will have to reconcile the inherent contradictions of the “we are all the same” discourse taking the analysis of social differences, such as class, gender and ethnicity, as a starting point to challenge existing inequalities of power.

## 1. Introduction

The vision of food sovereignty (FS hereafter) calls for radical changes in “agricultural, political and social systems related to food” (Wittman, Desmarais & Wiebe, 2010: 4). At the core of the realization of this alternative vision is what Patel terms a “radical egalitarianism” (Patel, 2009: 670), a call for equality based on social change and social justice. This change also entails addressing inequalities and asymmetries of power in gender relations. The commitment to gender equality was asserted by La Vía Campesina (LVC) at the fifth international conference in 2008, and re-confirmed at the sixth conference held in Jakarta in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

While women’s rights are seen as central to food sovereignty given the key role women play in food production and procurement, food preparation, family food security and food culture (Wittman, Desmarais & Wiebe, 2010; Patel, 2012), the way in which gender

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<sup>1</sup> During the fifth conference, held 16-23 October 2008 in Maputo, Mozambique, LVC launched a world campaign “For an End to Violence Against Women” (Patel, 2009; Wittman, 2011). Five years later, in Jakarta, at the Fourth Women’s Assembly of LVC, peasant women from all over the world reasserted the commitment to end violence against women and discussed achievements and ways forward, including a strategy for reinforcing and giving continuity to the campaign against violence in all countries (La Via Campesina website, n.d.).

inequalities ought to be challenged and women's rights affirmed is unclear. Few attempts have been made to systematically integrate gender in food sovereignty analysis.

FS itself, as Raj Patel notes, is 'an intentionally vague call...', 'a call for people to figure out for themselves what they want the right to food to mean in their communities ....' (Patel, 2012; Patel 2007 in Wittman, 2011: 92). This means that food sovereignty in general, and a gender perspective on food sovereignty in particular, are both still difficult notions to pin down in empirical work.

Women within LVC have actively advocated for gender equality in programmes, manifestos and within the organization itself (Wittman, Desmarais & Wiebe, 2010; Wittman, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. Women's rights are considered of paramount importance for the realization of food sovereignty (Wittman, Desmarais & Wiebe, 2010; Patel, 2012). Accordingly, the latest *Women of La Via Campesina Manifesto* (outcome of the 2013 LVC Jakarta conference) confirms gender justice and access to land as pillars of food sovereignty. The political project of the peasant women of LVC aims at fighting neoliberal policies, capitalism and patriarchy towards the achievement of a "new world" based on gender equality, social justice and food and seed sovereignty. As a feminist activist explains: "Linking food sovereignty and feminism is therefore the unavoidable challenge facing social movements such as LVC, a challenge that implies reviewing their areas of focus and their strategies with a view to advancing gender-equal ways of working and the empowerment of women" (Caro Molina, 2012).

The focus in FS discourse on "the convergence of interests of groups who live on the land" and their "peasant identity" means that "class and other divisions amongst the rural poor" may be ignored or downplayed (Cousins & Scoones, 2010: 44). The problem is that, when gender interests are incorporated in FS discourse, the same essentialising, "we are all the same" discourse (Brass 2000, p. 314) tends to appear again, this time in relation to peasant or rural women.

"Our biggest step towards ending injustice in the world is taken by breaking the poverty cycle and granting the rightful place that *we peasants* have to provide and guarantee sufficient and balanced food for the peoples, recognizing the central role of women in food production"

"*We women* demand a comprehensive Agrarian Reform to redistribute land with our full participation and integration throughout the process, ensuring not only access to land, but to all the instruments and mechanisms on an equal footing, with a just appreciation of our productive and reproductive work, where rural areas guarantee

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<sup>2</sup> For an account of gender issues within LVC, and its Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform, see Monsalve, S. 2006. Gender and land. In: M. Courville, R. Patel and P. Rosset, eds. *Promised land: competing visions of agrarian reform*. Oakland, CA: Food First Books, pp. 192–207.

a dignified and fair life for us.” (Jakarta Manifesto, 2013)<sup>3</sup>

This paper attempts to strip both food sovereignty, and gender equality and justice of their advocacy rhetoric, in order to detect underlying notions and issues that could be useful for analytical and policy purposes, and also highlight possible inconsistencies and areas where further theorizing and empirical work may be needed. We use case study evidence from countries where corporate agricultural expansion is on-going to highlight that different ways and wants of incorporation and struggle may take place on the ground depending on women’s and men’s different position, class and endowments. These, in turn, are contributing to processes of social differentiation and class formation, and thus creating rural communities and societies that are much more complex and antagonistic than those sketched in FS discourse and based on neopopulist claims of egalitarianism, cooperation and solidarity.

Gender analysis does not seem to feature systematically in empirical and analytical work on FS. For example, in 2008-2009 the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) and LVC conducted a self-study on the Campesino-to-Campesino Agroecology Movement (MACAC) in Cuba, as this was considered “the most illustrative case of ‘sustainable peasant agriculture’ and of farmer-to-farmer extension methodology” (Rosset, Sosa, Jaime, et al., 2011: 162). LVC and ANAP jointly designated a gender-balanced national-international team, consisting of male and female representatives from ANAP and LVC. Findings from the fieldwork indicated that the shift from traditional monoculture to diversified agroecological farming supported social transformation and challenged traditional gender roles. As women were reported noting, while traditionally the man “was the king”, through participation in the Campesino to-Campesino Agroecology Movement, “the roles and income earning opportunities for the different members of the nuclear and the extended family are also diversified...There are now a diversity of decision-making and income generating roles, all of which, we were told, work to reduce the weight of patriarchy inside the family unit” (Ibid, 2011: 184–185). However, this objective was unintended and not sought explicitly as one of the outcomes of the project as also indicated by the challenge of achieving gender equality in the movement (Ibid, 2011: 184). In 2009, 40 per cent of female coordinators were women, but only 12 percent of facilitators and 8 percent of promoters (Machin Sosa et. al, 2010: 70 in Rosset, Sosa, Jaime, et al., 2011).

We first need to deal with some of the problems involved in trying to make analytical sense of FS discourse and of gender issues within FS discourse. This means finding ways to recognise and problematise, rather than side-stepping them, the dualisms and diversities in contemporary ‘farming’ and ‘agriculture’; the heterogeneity of rural ‘communities’, and of ‘rural women’ and the gendered relations in which they are involved.

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: <http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/main-issues-mainmenu-27/women-mainmenu-39/1450-women-of-via-campesina-international-manifesto> [Accessed 20 July 2013]

## 2. Starting points

Our starting-point is that the potential strengths of FS discourse lie in ‘the heuristic approach to power relations that it invites, particularly with respect to gender’ (Patel, 2012). FS is about ‘power and control in the food system’ (Patel, 2012: 1), and that is where we should explore the links between gender and food, highlighting gender dimensions of the (lack of) control over food systems in which people are involved, as producers and/or consumers.

While local circuits of agrarian self-sufficiency, and new ‘nested markets’ linking producers and consumers (van der Ploeg, 2013: 130) may exist and may expand, most crop producers live wholly or partly by supplying the food and other needs of urban and / or distant non-cultivators and are dependent on various kinds of larger-scale, corporate actors to make these links.

Here it is useful to adopt Bernstein’s distinction between *farming* – “what farmers do”, production on the land and “their social and ecological conditions and practices, labour processes and so on” – and *agriculture*, a much broader notion embracing “farming together with all those economic interests, and their specialised institutions and activities, ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ of farming that affect the activities and reproduction of farmers” (Bernstein, 2010: 65, 124, 2013b: 22). Bernstein questions the validity and feasibility of a return to “small scale, low input family farming in the face of an ever-increasing population that is much larger and much more urban” (Bernstein, 2010, 2013a) If small-scale farming is to be part of the future, “it would have to use advanced technologies with high labour productivity and it would have to be integrated in certain kinds of social arrangements and not simply take place as individualised petty production” (Bernstein, 2013a). One of the key points Bernstein raises is that social movements cannot do without “an effective analysis of the complex and contradictory social realities they need to transform. In a capitalist world, understanding class dynamics should always be a point of departure and central element of such analysis” (Bernstein, 2010: 123).

In fact, virtually all common crops entering wider (national and global) circuits - including those on which the second part of our paper focuses - can be efficiently ‘farmed’ (cultivated), with high per-hectare yields, on small-scale farm units. However, they require larger-scale units to take care of downstream (and in many cases upstream) activities. Cultivators are therefore, like it or not, engaged with the ‘corporate sector’ in one form or another<sup>4</sup> in what are often highly complex commodity chains.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Corporate’ in this sense can be either capitalist firms, state-owned companies, non-profit organizations or farmer-owned cooperatives (cf White, Borras, Scoones, et al., 2012)

Small-scale ‘peasant’ or ‘family-farm’ based communities, once involved in commodity production, experience chronic tendencies to process of internal class-like differentiation. This has been shown by various studies to occur even in situations of engineered (relative) equality in landholdings, such as resettlement schemes, contract farming schemes and post-redistributive land reform. These tendencies to differentiation were described classically by Lenin, and were also recognised by Chayanov although for him they were not a major focus of interest. However, for various reasons they have only rarely resulted in the later shift from ‘differentiation’ to (class) ‘polarization’ as predicted by some rigid Marxist formulations. There are many possible counter-tendencies, some of them demographic/generational (for example, the splitting up of larger holdings among many children), some of them due to inherent resilience of ‘peasant’ farming (as recently expounded by van de Ploeg 2013), some even due to public intervention through progressive land taxation and/or land reforms.

The notion of ‘community’ meanwhile “remains (as so much else) under-theorised: whether class differentiation is strongly marked or not, ‘community’ and its reproduction is always likely to involve tensions of gender and intergenerational relations” (Bernstein, 2013b). Understanding and analysing the dynamics of gender inequality on the one hand, and the differences that exist among women on the other, should be one central pillar of ‘food sovereignty’ analysis.

Considering ‘gender’ in food sovereignty discourse means considering problems in gender relations not only on (small-scale) ‘farms’ but in different positions in differentiated agrarian labour regimes, and at different points in agro- commodity chains. To achieve a fully ‘ democratic conversation about food and agriculture policy’, women need to be able to participate as fully as men (Patel, 2012: 2), but this must also involve women involved in food systems in many different capacities, including:

- as direct producers on their own account, or as ‘unpaid family labour’ in family farms
- as direct producers on the land/farms of others (wage workers)
- as actors (own-account, unpaid family workers, wage workers) in the ‘corporate’ upstream and/or downstream entities in agro-commodity chains
- as providers of care and food (reproductive role)
- as consumers of food and other agricultural products which they have not themselves produced

To assume shared experiences, shared interests and shared struggles among women in all these (often overlapping) positions – as LVC discourse often appears to do, in advocacy mode - requires quite some discursive acrobatics.

These differences between and within rural communities in the gendered experience of incorporation, unfortunately, are rarely fully explored in studies of ‘gender implications of (land-grabs, agro-fuels expansion/ capitalist farming, etc.)’. We include in this critique the various studies which we ourselves have been involved in, and which we will discuss in the rest of this paper. Regrettably the studies also do not fully explore women’s reproductive role in the food system. Still, these case studies do allow us to detect unequalising tendencies and processes of gendered social differentiation on the ground especially in relation to incorporation and resistance to corporate ‘agriculture’ (sometimes, but not always, involving corporate ‘farming’ in the senses outlined above).

The case studies from which we have drawn examples are as follows:

Country (region)	Crops introduced	Form(s) of Incorporation	Source
Ghana (Northern Region)	Mango	Wage labour (plantation)	FAO 2013
Indonesia (W. Kalimantan)	Oil palm	Wage labour and Contract farming	Julia & White 2012
Lao PDR (Provinces of Vientiane Capital, Vientiane and Borikhamxai)	Jatropha Bananas Tobacco	Contract farming and wage labour (plantation)	Daley et al. 2013
Tanzania (Arusha, Northern Tanzania)	Flower & vegetable seeds	Contract farming	Daley & Park 2013
Zambia (Southern Province)	Sugar cane	Contract farming	FAO 2013

In the next section we draw on these cases to look at examples of differences between and within communities in women’s changing experience of:

- access to/control of land and other resources;
- division of labour;
- voice and participation in decision-making processes at the household and community level;
- access to food and household food situation

### 3. We are not all the same

As already noted, access to land is one of the pillars of food sovereignty. Gender issues in access to land have featured prominently since 2002 under the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform (GCAR) with activities spanning from research to advocacy and awareness raising (Monsalve Suárez, 2006). In Brazil, the mobilisation of rural women succeeded in



making joint land adjudication mandatory and making specific lines of credit available for rural women (Ibid, 2006: 196)<sup>5</sup>. For the most part, however, gender inequalities in access to and control of land continue to permeate agriculture and rural economies. On average, women comprise less than 20% of all landholders in developing countries and when they do control land, generally have plots that are smaller, and of inferior soil quality, compared to those of men (FAO, 2011). Patriarchal power relations and gender inequalities in land rights, decision-making and voice, among others, largely determine the forms of incorporation in and exclusion from incoming corporate agricultural ventures. However, these have been largely overlooked, as feminist scholars have noted, in studies conducted from an agrarian political economy perspective. In focusing on class relations as the main unit of analysis, agrarian political economy tended to overlook the role of other social relations in shaping relations of production and reproduction (Razavi, 2009). The male-headed peasant family was often assumed to be the basic unit of production ignoring female-headed households and the differences and the nature of the relationships among different household members (Deere, 1995: 63). Equally the realm of domestic unpaid labour, and of non-commodified work more broadly, has been largely disregarded by agrarian political economy due to “its fixation with the sphere of commodities where value is realised” (O’Laughlin 2008: 352 cit. in Razavi, 2009: 207; O’Laughlin, 2009: 204).<sup>6</sup>

Gender inequality in relations of property has many implications in terms of FS especially when communities engage with corporate agriculture in lieu of or along with ‘(independent) farming’. A further complication is that women’s land rights are not just about property rights. They often comprise nested, overlapping, sometimes conflicting rights held under different tenure systems (statutory, customary, religious), land use and decision-making patterns, inheritance and marriage rules and customs, as well as rights to access and use communal lands for collection of non-timber forest products, firewood and medicinal plants

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<sup>5</sup> However, Monsalve (2006) questions the reforms aiming to strengthen women’s individual land property rights, indicating that these may actually be an element in a more general ‘Trojan horse’ of neo liberal agricultural and land policies based on individual land titling. This position emerged during the debates held at the GCAR international seminar on “Agrarian Reform and Gender”, held in 2003 in Cochabamba, Bolivia, which convened representatives of peasant, indigenous and human rights movements from 24 countries. Within a position that advocates for communal forms of land tenancy, the participants also recognized the need to strengthen women’s land rights in different tenure systems and “not only as individual private property” (200). They asked: “how secure can individual entitlements to lands for peasants women be when established in a context of privatization and economic liberalization policies that have already brought about dispossession and loss of land of many families and communities?” (198)

Along the same lines, writing about South Africa, O’Laughlin says: “A narrow emphasis on legalizing women’s individual right to land embeds a standard neoliberal proposition – the centrality of privatization and the commodification of land – within the liberal language of human rights. It focuses our attention on gender inequality in inheritance of property, of which the rural poor, women and men, have very little. Concerned with securing the property of those who have, titling excludes those who have not” (O’Laughlin, 2009: 203).

<sup>6</sup> As O’Laughlin notes “the dynamics of capital accumulation also depend on how non-marketed work affects the real wage and the prices of commodities that enter the circuit of capital. Above all, from the perspective of labour a livelihood does not depend on wage income alone, for it includes the unmarketed labour of women, children and men” (O’Laughlin, 2009: 191).

(Behrman, Meinzen-Dick & Quisumbing, 2012; Daley & Park, 2012). They often consist of secondary use and access rights granted through male relatives, and thus subject to change along with any changes in the conditions of men's rights over land.

One clear example is changes in land control that occur when households are incorporated in corporate agriculture through contract farming schemes. In Indonesia, most indigenous Dayak communities in West Kalimantan, although denying women access to the community's political space, acknowledge women's right to land under customary tenure. However, the expansion of oil palm plantations in the area has undermined Dayak women's customary land rights through the formal system of smallholder registration based on 'Family Heads' (Kepala Keluarga), whereby the husband is designated as the head of the family and thus registered as the smallholder. When the conversion to oil-palm was made and households surrendered (on average) 7 ha of land under customary tenure to get 2 ha of contract-farming land in formal tenure, the new contract-farming plots were nearly always registered in the name of the male household head. So in a single bureaucratic stroke, women lost rights to land and produce (Julia & White, 2012).

In an Iban Dayak community<sup>7</sup> located on the border of Indonesia-Malaysia, aside from losing their customary residential area and being relocated into the plantation compound, twenty-two households were also forcibly dispossessed of their agricultural lands (rice fields, fruit and rubber orchards) and access to rattan, which is one of the main livelihood sources of the Iban community. After some time, the women received a token amount of compensation for their agricultural lands, but this was unilaterally fixed by the company. Two of the women stated:

“[My loss] was a lot. I had my four rubber orchards flattened down to the ground. How should I eat now? Others could tap their rubber, while I couldn't. Regrettably, they [the rubber plots] were immediately cleared out [by the company]. It was forced [clearance]<sup>8</sup>.”

“The clearance [of paddy fields] was done early in the morning. Initially, it was said to be for road construction.. No compensation was given at the time of clearance [2009], but now it was paid, just recently [2011]. Compensation was fixed at three million rupiah per hectare. [I] don't know about the [method of] payment. [I] just took what was paid. If [the company] said it was three hectares, then it was three hectares. [I] got about four million rupiah as compensation, and it is not worth as much as [my] lost rice field.”

<sup>7</sup> The information about the Iban Dayak community and the quotes come from qualitative research conducted by Julia in October 2011. The report, which has not been published, was commissioned by the Economic and Social Empowerment Commission of Pontianak Archdiocese.

<sup>8</sup> One million Indonesian Rupiah is equivalent to about US \$90 or €70.

The loss of their lands and other sources of livelihood left women in these households with no other livelihood option than to work as wage labour at the plantation with daily payments ranging from Rp 32,200 (approx. US\$ 4) as daily labourer to Rp 41,200 (approx. US\$ 5) as permanent contract labourer. The women are mostly recruited as daily labourers, while the men have wider range of jobs available for them, from daily labourer (usually harvester) to public relations officer.

Many of the cases analysed for this paper did not involve the acquisition of large tracts of land and dispossession of local people. However, all were reported as having notable (gendered) implications with regards to changes in control of land and its produce brought about by the investments, particularly with respect to collection of and access to non-traditional forest products (NTFPs). For instance, in the case of a *Jatropha* investment in Vientiane province in Lao PDR before 1998, local women and men had been farming upland rice under shifting cultivation in the plantation area, which was officially state forest. After the government banned shifting cultivation and allocated the area to the village as communal land, the women used it for collecting NTFPs for household consumption and sale. Since the *Jatropha* plantations started, however, many kinds of NTFPs have declined, with repercussions on food availability and women's income (Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013: 31).

Similarly in Northern Ghana, when a mango plantation was established, all but three of the trees previously standing on the land were cleared. Thus many people had to travel longer distances to collect fuelwood, fruits and nuts. Focus group participants at Gushie reported that women in Gushie and Dipale now walk 3 to 4 km to access fuel wood, fruits and nuts<sup>9</sup> (FAO, 2013a: 18).

In the Iban Dayak case mentioned above, due to the destruction of customary protected forests people lost access to rattan, which was a major contributor to households' income, particularly of landless households who were most dependent on extracting forest products for their livelihood. One female head of household highlighted that life was harder for her and her young son as she lost significant income from rattan and had no option than to take up various kinds of other work, such as rubber sharecropping, collecting agar wood and wage work as log carrier in other areas. She has to work longer hours with less income compared to when she could collect rattan<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to farming, traditional sources of livelihood in this region are fishing and livestock for men and petty trading of foodstuffs, charcoal production, collection of firewood and picking of dawadawa and shea fruit from the wild for sale for women (FAO, 2013a: 15).

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 6.

Lack of access to land and patriarchal power relations also hamper women's full participation in community decision-making and interaction with the investors. In the mango investment in Northern Ghana, women were excluded from community consultations over land leases with the mango producing company. As a consequence, they received no compensation and were left out of contract farming opportunities, while losing access to land they were using (FAO, 2013a). White and Julia report similar difficulties faced by women of Indonesian Hibun Dayak communities, who were excluded from the village consultations over the establishment of an oil palm plantation. Customarily women are not allowed to participate in community politics and "the voice of the men was considered to be the unanimous voice of the villagers" (Julia & White, 2012: 1012).

Whilst crucial for food collection and production, access to land also affects the likelihood that women may be able to participate on their own account in contract farming. For instance, in the case of the mango company mentioned above, 149 (12 percent) of the 1,200 registered outgrowers are women – a relatively high rate of female participation compared to other mango producer groups in Ghana. Among the factors that appear to have contributed to women's involvement was the fact that the chiefs of two communities in Geshiegu-Karaga District, which account for over 50 percent of all female outgrowers, made vast areas of land available for mango cultivation to any community member wishing to join the scheme, including women. Women in the Northern Region are less likely to access land, particularly for growing perennial crops that are considered as granting certain rights over the land on which are grown. Traditionally, thus, men are reluctant to allow women's engagement in perennial crop cultivation, particularly unmarried women whose future husbands may also advance claims on the land (FAO, 2013a: 23).

Maasai women in polygamous households in Lepurko, Northern Tanzania, each had their own assigned plot and, as a consequence, many of them had their own individual contract for growing flowers for seeds with a well-established flower and vegetable seeds Dutch company. However, focus group discussions indicated that these women were not free to decide what to plant on their own fields and had been instructed by their husbands to sign the contracts as outgrowers. They also had to consult with their husbands on how to spend the cash income received, which was largely used to pay school fees for their children (Daley & Park, 2012: 20).

In contrast, in Zambia, focus group discussions held with male and female outgrowers with a sugar cane company revealed that in male-headed households where women were the main (registered) members of the scheme, women had a greater say over how the income was used than when the man was the registered member (FAO, 2013b: 27). "They believed that through their involvement they have challenged negative attitudes about their capabilities and their rights. They also felt they were able to articulate their problems and identify solutions when necessary, particularly when in group settings" (Ibid 2013b: 29).

Similarly, in the Tanzanian case, the women indicated they preferred having their own contracts. As one woman highlighted,

“having a contract in my name feels good as the contract gives me security. It is easier to get loans from friends because they know you have a contract ... and you will get income.” (Daley & Park, 2012: 20)

In Tanzania, the women who did not have their own individual contracts said that they decided jointly with their husbands on matters relating to land use and income, while men in all the focus groups claimed they consulted with their wives on all decisions regarding land. As one young man in Mareu elaborated, “land cannot be sold without asking the wives; if this happens the wife can take the husband to court” (Ibid, 2012: 20).

These few examples indicate that different women may also have different experiences with regards to changes in land use. Some women appeared to be more independent as a result of their engagement with the investments. Conversely, others were not in the position to decide autonomously how to use the land in the first place and whether or not to join a contract farming scheme. Even when they were, they might not have the capital to do so. Another example from Tanzania may be illustrative of this last point. In contrast to flower seeds farmers, among whom women accounted for 22% of the total contracted farmers, only 12% of contracted vegetable seeds farmers were women at the time of the fieldwork. Vegetable seed production is very high input and more capital intensive than flower seed production needing fertilizers and more pesticides as well as irrigation. Some outgrowers had piped water on their land and others had drainage channels; most also used tractors for preparing their land. They generally tended to be richer than flower seed outgrowers and had started vegetable seeds farming on top of other income-generating activities. Some of them were businessmen or teachers, while others were commercial farmers who grew other crops, such as maize, for sale. The few women vegetable seed outgrowers (5 out of 41) were generally divorced or widowed, or had husbands who were busy with other activities of their own (Daley & Park, 2012: 22). Similarly in Laos, the high start up costs of tobacco farming made it potentially out of reach of poorer farmers. Most of the households who had joined got the cash needed upfront through bank loans (Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013: 33).

Notably, all of the outgrowers in the vegetable seeds focus groups, with the exception of one woman, had rented in land. As noted above, vegetables require a lot of water so the fields need to have irrigation canals or be close to water. However, men’s fields, ranging from 4-8 acres, were considerably bigger than those of women, which were mostly around 2 acres. The cost of renting-in land for growing vegetables is twice as much as it is for growing maize – TSh 100,000 (US\$ 66) per acre versus TSh 50,000 (US\$ 33) per acre at the time of

the fieldwork. Therefore, this creates a barrier to accessing this business for most women who tend to have fewer resources than men (Daley & Park, 2012: 23).

Turning to issues directly relating to FS, it is noteworthy that flower seed outgrowers were cultivating flowers on land that was previously used for food crops. Some had been able to rent additional plots of land to continue growing maize, but women in Kiserian and Lepurko pointed out that for them cultivating flowers meant having less land for maize (Ibid, 2012: 19). In addition, because tending flowers can take up to 12 hours a day during the growing season, women were working longer hours and had almost no time for other activities, sometimes having to skip meals. Nonetheless, most women participants in the focus group discussions welcomed the possibility of growing flowers because it meant having a cash crop, which could be useful if maize harvests failed. Most outgrowers, however, indicated that growing flowers was not as profitable as it used to be because life had become more expensive (Ibid, 2012: 21).

In Zambia the sugar cane company made 0.5-1 ha of marginal lands available to its outgrowers as domestic plots. Interviews with the company's extension officer and individual farmers indicated that many farmers had utilized the land to produce food for their own consumption. Women in particular used these plots for household food crops because their workload did not leave them enough time for cash crops. Instead, anecdotal evidence suggests that men tended to use this piece of land to grow cash crops. Thus, in terms of food security, despite being constrained by their overall labour burden in their ability to produce and sell cash crops, female-headed households seemed to be faring better in terms of nutrition (FAO, 2013b: 28).

Both in the Lao PDR and Tanzania cases, the fieldwork indicated that people engaged with corporate agriculture reported greater benefits in terms of cash income than improvements in the household food situation (Daley & Park, 2012; Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013). In Tanzania, 71% of the people consulted reported having improved their cash income since their involvement with the investment, as opposed to 49% of people who noted an improvement in their households' food situation (Daley & Park, 2012: 35). In Lao PDR, 90% of respondents said they were "better off" in terms of cash income, while only 52% said they were "better off" in terms of their food situation (Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013: 35)<sup>11</sup>. In Laos, in terms of impact on family food situation, the majority of negative responses were linked to the effects of the investment on local access to NTFPs and women's related concerns about food security. With the exception of landless and land poor people who were found amongst plantation workers, most of those engaged in contract farming also had access to family land for rice growing. The majority of responses that reported "no changes" in the

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<sup>11</sup> Additionally, in Tanzania, 28% of respondents noted "no change" in their cash income and 1% said they were "worse off" (Daley & Park, 2012: 35). In Lao PDR, 29% of FGD participants said there had been no change in their food situation and 22% indicated they were "worse off" than before.

food situation were cases where food security had not been affected and income from the investment was being used for children's education or transportation, rather than to buy more or better food; in some cases it was also because the household already had a good food situation (Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013: 43).

Wage labour represents another form of incorporation in corporate agriculture. Although the patterns of social differentiation were not found to be nearly as polarising as in the Leninist scenario, the case studies suggest that those who were landless or had less land were more likely to engage as wage labourers on plantations and as casual labourers for other farmers. For instance, in Lao PDR it was notably younger women and men from land-poor households and ethnic minorities who appeared to engage more as casual labourers on the banana plantations of a British-owned company with operations in Borikhamxai province (Ibid 2013: 31).<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in the flower and vegetable seeds venture in Tanzania, which had a nucleus farm in addition to outgrower operations, most of the divorced, separated and widowed female wage workers<sup>13</sup> interviewed were no longer farming and had migrated to the area having lost access to land in their home villages and having heard that there was employment in horticulture. Sixty-one per cent of the employees of the company were women, hired as permanent, temporary or casual workers on the nucleus farm. In this case, the level of satisfaction among women employees was very high as confirmed by the long-standing relationship with the company of most women interviewed. They had been with the company for between 3 and 16 years and said they "would like other companies to help fellow women and casual workers to get the same benefits as us," (Daley & Park, 2012: 23) indicating a positive attitude towards incorporation through wage employment. These women had apparently gone through a successful process of 'proletarianisation' and said they were much better off now as, "even if they don't have money for food, they can always get loans having a proper job."<sup>14</sup>

However, having more access to cash does not automatically translate to better access to food as the Indonesia case shows. In the Iban Dayak community<sup>15</sup>, women who lost their land have also become wage labourers on the oil-palm plantation. In general the community is increasingly becoming more dependent on cash for their households' food

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<sup>12</sup> It is important, however, to highlight that these people had been dispossessed of control over land not by processes ignited by capitalist ventures but by past decades of government resettlement and land reform policies (Lund, 2011: 900).

<sup>13</sup> Of the total workforce, 49% are permanent employees (staff), 32% are temporary (specific) workers who have annual renewable contracts and 19% are transient workers (casual labourers) who may be hired for one, two or three months. Female participation is higher among specific (81%) and transient (64%) as opposed to permanent workers (48%) (Daley & Park, 2012: 24)

<sup>14</sup> From notes taken by Park in Arusha during focus group discussions held with female wage workers 15 June, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> From field notes taken by Julia in October 2011.

supply and the plantation as the main source of cash economy. But this is seen in a very different light by women in different positions. One woman noted:

“[We] produced our own in the past, then, one should obtain and produce by oneself in order to have them [the food]. Now, we must purchase in order to obtain food as lands have all been condemned. None can be planted anymore. Like it or not, it’s only money that talks now.”

Conversely, a woman whose husband had been recruited as the public relation officer of the plantation stated her appreciation for the greater ease of life made possible by the new availability of purchased foods:

“In the past, if we wanted to buy fish or other types of meat, we had to travel as far as to Seluas [the sub-district town]. Now, those things come by themselves [to the village]...really, people deliver them.”

The women who belong to small-scale farmer households also complained about the rising price of food and other goods. Thus, although the households obtained more cash, their purchasing power was weaker. The women reported experiencing difficulty in allocating their households’ income to meet other basic needs, such as, health and education of their children.

With the exception of the one case in Tanzania, overall women who are engaged in wage work tend to be in non-permanent, worse-paid jobs that are often segregated by sex, task and crop (Daley & Park, 2012; Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013; FAO, 2013a, 2013b). Again with the exception of the flower and vegetable seeds company, women were absent or under-represented in managerial or supervisory roles. Consequently, women were on average earning less than men per month and being casual workers had worse employment conditions compared to their male counterparts in permanent roles. Women also were responsible for most domestic work so as wage workers they experienced an increase in their overall workload. In the Tanzania case above, some married women said they were stressed from having everything on their shoulders and no help from their husbands who do not “interfere” at all with household activities like cooking (Daley & Park, 2012: 25).

In all cases across countries and crops, there was a distinct division of labour, whereby women had specific tasks in farming and agriculture, were responsible for collection of non-timber forest products, fuel wood and water and bore more or less entirely the weight of care and domestic tasks. As wives of contract farmers, women had increased workloads in farming and agriculture but also in domestic activities, sometimes having to prepare meals for casual labourers who were hired to help with the investment crop, as it was the case with tobacco farmers in Laos. However, in Lao PDR and Tanzania women in focus groups



indicated a number of cascading benefits in terms of more money available for children's school fees, medicines, household appliances and buying meat (Daley & Park, 2012; Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013). It is also worth mentioning, although not explicitly addressed in the studies, that women tended to weight their personal benefits against the overall wellbeing of their families, thus confirming that households and gender relations are sites of contradiction and resistance but also cooperation, sharing and mutuality (Whitehead & Kabeer, 2001; Jackson, 2003; Razavi, 2003; O'Laughlin, 2009).

Among tobacco contract farmers in Lao PDR, a significant difference was observed between capitalist farmers, in Bernstein's definition (Bernstein, 2010: 104), who were hiring in labour and renting additional land to cultivate tobacco<sup>16</sup>, and medium farmers or petty commodity producers who were struggling to make ends meet. In both groups equally, however, women lamented having to bear the heavy burden of the additional production for the market (Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013). So while for the male farmers the incorporation translated into higher incomes, albeit with differences between the more and less well-to-do ones, for their wives it meant more work, but no more money directly available to them. Although many male focus group respondents said that it was the women who managed the household budget, teasingly alluding to their 'wives' power', the fact that women did not participate in community decision-making, training and extension opportunities, suggests that there was no real equality within households (Ibid) and no equal path of social differentiation.

There were also a few female heads of household who were struggling to keep up with tobacco production as all their children had left for white-collar jobs in the cities and they could not afford to pay for casual labourers to help out. Household structure and number of active members thus had implications for the capacity to engage in commercial agriculture as much as access to land. In a village where cassava contract farming was taking place, around 60 out of the village total of 146 households had members who worked as casual labourers for other households because of being land-poor. Around 70% of those working as casual labourers in this village were women (Daley, Osorio & Park, 2013: 32).

There were also cases of successful female outgrowers who were, in some instances, more productive than their male counterparts as the following testimony from a Zambian female sugar cane farmer illustrates:

"I am able to grow maize on the 1 hectare of dwelling space to meet my food security requirements and generate additional income for my households. With

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<sup>16</sup> Tobacco farmers in Pakse Village lived in an area with more fertile lands and easier access to water and roads. In contrast, those living in Somsanook Village were more isolated and farther away from the water. Both villages are in Pakkading District, Borikhamxai Province.

proper management and care, we are able to feed ourselves for the whole year. Last year, I harvested 24 x50 kg bags.

I have built a 3 bed-room house with a 2 roomed servant quarters. All my children are in school except for two, of which one has completed school and is about to enter college and the other is below primary school age. I belong to Group 2 of farmers which has 50 houses but only 4 of us are women. Yet female farmers generally perform better with respect productivity and investments in household welfare improvements.

They invest more in household goods and family education. As you can see, I own a car and have bought a 30 x 30 metres residential plot in Mazabuka town at K4.5 mn (about USD 1,000). I have already bought 1,500x 4 inch blocks you see over there next to the car for this venture. I want to rent the new house so that I diversify my risk portfolio. In addition, I have employed 25 irrigation workers which most of the male farmers fail to do.” (FAO, 2013b: 29)

#### 4. Conclusions

New classes of labourers and farmers are emerging through wage work available on plantations and contract farming opportunities. Although it is not always clear where women stand with respect to these, especially when they have been indirectly and/or adversely incorporated (for instance, through increased burdens of unpaid labour on their family farms), a general conclusion that can be drawn is that paths of differentiation and class formation can be diverse depending on the relative status, the terms of incorporation and entitlements of different individuals and household members. So while some women consider opportunities they have to engage with agribusinesses beneficial, for other women it can mean more work and few benefits. Finally some women did not have the capital and the resources needed to participate in the first place.

In terms of food sovereignty, the case studies suggest that women’s access to the means of production, particularly land, and control over what to produce are still largely constrained by patriarchal relations of power operating at community and household level. At the same time, however, there are also important differences in women’s experiences both within and between communities, shaped by the perceptions and opportunities that different (classes of) women have vis-à-vis diverse forms of incorporation. So for instance, Masaai women who were persuaded by their husbands to enter their own individual contracts but did not control the income deriving from the cash crop complained that growing flowers equalled less land for maize. In contrast, female sugar cane contract farmers in Zambia were making a good living for themselves and their families and reinvesting in agriculture and beyond.

The case studies we have presented are undeniably inadequate for a thorough analysis. However, the findings do support the argument that “women are not all the same” to begin with, in terms of endowments, position within the household and community, needs and aspirations, but also in relation to what they may want and expect for themselves and their families by engaging or not in corporate agriculture. Agroecology, based on the recognition of women’s role in the food chain, may be a valid alternative to corporate agriculture (without going into the debate on whether it may represent a sustainable answer to the challenges of feeding the world’s growing non-rural, non-farming population). However, issues around gender inequalities, patriarchal relations and class-based differences still need to be fully addressed recognizing and taking into account the diverse positions and roles of different groups (and women in different positions within those groups). Finally, in the event that gender justice and empowerment for rural women could be achieved, to assume that all rural women would choose (small-scale / family) ‘farming’ as opposed to engagement with corporate agriculture is quite a leap of faith.

In summary, we hope in this paper to have provided support for three linked arguments. First, proponents of food sovereignty need to systematically address gender as a strategic element in its construct and not only as a mobilizing ideology. Second, we maintain that if food sovereignty is to have an intellectual future within critical agrarian studies, it will have to reconcile the inherent contradictions of the “we are all the same” discourse (Brass, 2000: 314) taking the analysis of social differences, such as class, gender and ethnicity, as a starting point to challenge existing inequalities of power. Finally, the incorporation of gender interests and gender analysis in FS discourse requires that tendencies to generalisation must be corrected by recognition and exploration of differences in women’s experiences, interests and responses both between and within communities. While all the points raised above are equally important, perhaps it is this last one that requires careful empirical work more urgently.

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# FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES

## Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has — as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework — barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First](#), [Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” will be held at Yale University on September 14–15, 2013. The event will bring together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting is to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

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