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# The feminist dimensions of food sovereignty: insights from La Via Campesina's politics

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## ABSTRACT

Expanding and defending women's rights and eradicating women's oppression have become key to La Via Campesina and its conceptualization and practice of food sovereignty. In this paper, we analyze how gender equality and feminism have gained momentum within the movement, and how the work on gender issues configures a feminist politics and praxis at the global level. As LVC celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, we examine what difference women's decades-long struggles have made within the movement, especially since 1996, and how these have shaped the movement's politics, both organizationally and politically. We argue that women's activism has contributed to radicalizing food sovereignty with a feminist perspective.

## KEYWORDS

Peasant women; food sovereignty; gender; feminism; La Via Campesina

## 1. Introduction

Twenty-five years after first articulating a peasant notion of food sovereignty, on 13 October 2021, La Via Campesina (LVC) released its 'Manifesto for the Future of the Planet'. Beginning with 'Food sovereignty is a philosophy of life', the manifesto asserts that,

Social peace, social justice *gender justice* and solidarity economies are essential pre-conditions for realizing food sovereignty. [...] It [food sovereignty] calls for a society that *rejects discrimination in all forms – caste, class, racial and gender* – and urges people to fight *patriarchy* and parochialism. [...]

*Peasant women and other oppressed gender minorities* must find equal space in the leadership of our movement at all levels. We must sow the seeds of solidarity in our communities and address all forms of discrimination that keep rural societies divided.

Food sovereignty offers a manifesto for the future, a *feminist vision* that embraces diversity. It is an idea that unites humanity and puts us at the service of Mother Earth that feeds and nourishes us. (authors' emphasis, La Via Campesina 2021a)

The quote above reveals just how crucial gender equality and feminism are to both LVC and food sovereignty. While food sovereignty emerged as a critique and radical

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alternative to neoliberal approaches of agrarian and food policies, it also turned its gaze on women's rights and asymmetrical gender relations. For LVC, the end of sex and gender-based violence and discrimination is at the core of food sovereignty. Developing transformative strategies to change gender norms and relations are now key elements of the food sovereignty framework. This article analyzes how gender equality and feminism have become central to LVC and its conceptualization and praxis of food sovereignty. We demonstrate that this is the result of decades of women's 'invention and hard work', to use the words of Doreen Massey (2009), within the movement and their engagement in a carefully cultivated global 'feminism from below' – a feminism arising from peasant women's lived experiences, needs, interests, aspirations and struggles.

In this paper, we focus on women's on-going struggle for gender equality within the movement, as it relates to overcoming the social differences between men and women. We recognize that over the years, LVC's struggles for gender equality<sup>1</sup> have evolved in two important ways: First, by expanding the definition of gender to pay more attention to the intersectional differences between women, that is, understanding gender as being constituted also by class, sexuality, ethnicity, age and other axes of structural oppression; and secondly, to include sexual and gender diversity, thus considering issues of gender fluidity, gender nonconformity, and non-heterosexuality. However, our goal is to shed light specifically on how women's struggles for gender equality have shaped the movement's politics both organizationally and politically, and to expand understandings of the feminist dimensions of food sovereignty. By focusing on women's struggles, we are in no way underestimating the significant supportive role that many men within the movement have played over the years; instead, our analysis centers on women's activism since they were and remain the key drivers of gender equality struggles within the movement.

LVC is critical of gender and development approaches that target women as objects of recognition, inclusion, and empowerment (see Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007) while failing to deal with and contest the complexity, and dynamics of power relations and privilege (Cornwall and Rivas 2015) including the structures and forces of the global industrial food system (MacInnis et al. 2022). LVC's focus on inequalities and power relations, collective rights and the de-commodification of resources inserts food sovereignty well beyond strands of feminism grounded in a neoliberal framework that understands gender equality in the narrow terms of individual rights to market participation and private land ownership (Lewis 2015; Collins 2018; Deere 1985, 2017). Food sovereignty also carries the idea of gender justice in relation to women by demanding the more equal redistribution of economic resources and wealth between men and women, the recognition of women's rights, and women's meaningful participation in the decisions that affect their lives (Deepak 2014; Monsalve 2006; Brochner 2014). In this paper, we highlight how LVC has constructed an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and intersectional feminism with attention to tackling oppressive power relations and privilege between men and women in rural organizations and the countryside, while

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<sup>1</sup>This evolution of the concept reflects shifts in the broader debates of gender equality, towards intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2017), and non-binary views of gender. However, in LVC, the initial focus on gender equality and women as a homogeneous group is not to be seen as an expression of the privilege of white, heterosexual, middle-class, wealthier peasant and rural women. Instead, it reflects the earlier attention and interpretation of gender as the social differentiation of people as 'men' and 'women', generally ascribed onto the sex categories of female and male, and originating more privilege and rights to men than to women (and other genders).

**Table 1.** List of LVC's women's assemblies, youth assemblies and international conferences.

Year / Location	Title of event	Resulting declarations (Titles redacted by authors)
1993 Mons	International Conference of the <i>Vía Campesina</i>	Mons Declaration
1996 Tlaxcala	II International Conference of the <i>Vía Campesina</i>	Tlaxcala Declaration
2000 Bangalore	First International Women's Assembly III International Conference of the <i>Vía Campesina</i>	Bangalore Declaration
2004 São Paulo	Second International Assembly of Rural Women First Youth Assembly IV International Conference of the <i>Vía Campesina</i>	Second Women's Assembly Declaration First Youth Assembly Declaration São Paulo Declaration
2008 Maputo	Third Assembly of the Women of the <i>Vía Campesina</i> Second Youth Assembly V International Conference of <i>La Vía Campesina</i>	Third Women's Assembly Declaration Second Youth Assembly Declaration Maputo Declaration
2013 Jakarta	Fourth Women's Assembly Third International Youth Assembly VI Conference of <i>la Vía Campesina</i> – Edigio Brunetto	Women of <i>Vía Campesina</i> Internacional Manifesto Third Youth Assembly Declaration The Jakarta Call
2017 Derio	Fifth Women's Assembly Fourth Youth Assembly VII International Conference, <i>La Vía Campesina</i>	Fifth Women's Assembly Declaration Fourth Youth Assembly Declaration Derio Declaration

addressing gendered divisions of labor in both production and reproduction spheres. We also show the importance of building women's autonomous spaces to advance LVC's feminist politics and praxis at the global level.

This paper draws on an examination of LVC's main declarations resulting from its International Conferences, Women's Assemblies, and Youth Assemblies held from its formal emergence in 1993 to the most recent, in 2017 (See [Table 1](#)). Since these gatherings are spaces of collective deliberation, debate and consensus-building as well as being the highest decision-making and representative political spaces within the movement,<sup>2</sup> the declarations and accompanying documents provide important insights into the movement's analysis, dynamics, vision, actions and paths forward. While many authors writing on LVC use interviews with movement leaders as key sources, we chose to focus exclusively on these documents for the following reasons. First, we wanted to capture the collective voice of the movement rather than depending on the experiences, thoughts and analyses of individuals. Although leaders certainly play a critical role in inserting key issues in the political agenda of the movement, and moving them forward, they are also elected by their respective region on the basis of the movement's politics as decided in these spaces and reflected in these documents. Second, the declarations and associated documents are the results of extended reflection, exchanges of experience and analyses, debate, negotiation, collaboration and consensus. Therefore, we consider these documents to be a privileged and rich source for an analysis of how a feminist politics has evolved within, and throughout the movement. Because of their historical breadth and relevance for the movement's positioning vis-a-vis gender and food sovereignty, we also consulted three additional key documents released by LVC: 'The right to produce and access: A future without hunger' presented by LVC at the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, 'A manifesto for the future of our planet. Official

<sup>2</sup>All representatives who participate in these events attend as delegates from their respective organizations and regions.

statement from La Via Campesina, as we mark 25 years of our collective struggles for food sovereignty' (2021a) and 'Graphic Book: The Path of Peasant and Popular Feminism in La Via Campesina' (2021b). We also considered the Women's Declaration and the Declaration of Nyéléni because of the critical role LVC played in the Nyéléni 2007 Forum for Food Sovereignty. In addition, the paper draws on Annette A. Desmarais' long engagement with LVC, as a participant at its founding conference, a movement technical support staff for nearly a decade, and finally since 2004, as a scholar-activist conducting research with member organizations and an observer at Via Campesina international gatherings. She has attended all of the Women's Assemblies and International Conferences.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 critically reviews the literature on food sovereignty, women, gender, and feminism to identify different positions vis-a-vis the potential of food sovereignty to address gender equality. Section 3 analyzes the feminist dimensions of food sovereignty by focusing on LVC's work and politics concerning gender equality. We first shed light on the organizational challenges of building a feminism from below and we then examine how a feminist political praxis has contributed to radicalize the movement's conceptualization and practice of food sovereignty, and the movement itself. Section 4 concludes by discussing the relationship of food sovereignty and feminist politics.

## 2. Food sovereignty, women, gender, and feminism

The literature analyzing the interrelations between food sovereignty, women, gender, and feminism is not extensive.<sup>3</sup> Even though peasant and rural women placed gender equality within LVC's politics of food sovereignty as early as the mid-1990s, it was nearly two decades later that more academic literature began to examine these issues, especially in works published from 2013 onward. This signals the increasing relevance of gender issues and feminist approaches as an analytical and empirical focus of research on food sovereignty.

Some key topics addressed in this literature include women's rights to land and gender-responsive land reforms (Monsalve 2006; Deere 2017; Collins 2018); agroecology and women's labor and knowledge (Cid-Aguayo and Latta 2015; Bezner-Kerr et al. 2019; Trevilla-Espinal et al. 2021; Bezerra et al. 2022); Indigenous sovereignty and politics (Figueroa-Helland, Thomas, and Aguilera 2018; Ngcoya and Kumarakulasingam 2017; Grey and Patel 2014); gender justice in international food politics (Collins 2018, 2022; Martignoni and Claeys 2022); feminist pedagogy and cultural resources (Schwendler and Thompson 2017; Gallar-Hernández 2021), and feminist research methodologies (Lewis 2015; Martignoni 2021).

The literature also reflects different positions vis-a-vis the potential of food sovereignty to address gender equality, which we categorize, at the risk of simplification, as critical, celebratory, and nuanced. Critical scholars point to a key contradiction of food sovereignty discourse in LVC: between the defence of family farming, since family farming characterizes most of the peasantry, and the pursuit of gender equality. As Patel (2009, 667) argues, 'the family is one of the oldest factories for patriarchy'. For these scholars, it is thus difficult to conceptualize food sovereignty as feminist. On the celebratory

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<sup>3</sup>As our focus is gender equality as it relates to women, we did not consider publications on other gender oppressed minorities.

side, research focuses on making visible peasant women's everyday lives and agency, not always with attention to structural constraints and differentiation processes. In this research, food sovereignty is most likely feminist. More nuanced approaches focus on the specific factors that enable or block advances in gender equality and food sovereignty as embedded in context, while paying attention to issues of power, privilege, intersecting oppressions, and subjectivity-formation. In the latter studies, there is potential for food sovereignty to be feminist. Although we fully recognize that there is often some blurring of lines between categories, we find it useful to highlight some distinguishing features in the literature. Below we expand on each of these different approaches.

Criticism towards food sovereignty and the gender politics of LVC claims that focusing on gender within the movement is more a 'mobilizing ideology' than a strategic element of the movement's conceptualization of food sovereignty (Park, White, and Julia 2015, 584). A case in point, is the argument that it is a discourse that prioritizes 'peasant unity' accompanied with a 'classic "add women – *but do not stir*" approach' (Conway 2018, 197; emphasis in the original) that lacks systematic attention to intra-household inequalities and heteronormativity relations, gendered divisions of agricultural labor and land allocation practices, women's unrecognized and unpaid care work, and the intersection of oppressions as women are not all the same (Park, White, and Julia 2015; Conway 2018; Agarwal 2014; Jacobs 2015). As Agarwal (2014, 1250) puts it: 'an emphasis on family farming, which often depends on women's unpaid labor, could go in the opposite direction [of tackling unequal gender relations], unless intra-household inequalities are addressed'. For her (2014, 1255; emphasis added),

Family farms do not provide autonomy to women workers or the means to realize their potential as farmers. *Hence a nod toward gender equality is not enough.* The problems women face as farmers are structural and deep-rooted, and would need to be addressed specifically. This would include redistributing productive assets such as land and inputs within peasant households in gender-equal ways, and directing state services to cater better to the needs of women farmers, such as services relating to credit, extension, training, information on new technology, field trials, input supply, storage and marketing.

Similarly, but with a focus on food provision and domestic work, Sachs and Patel-Campillo (2014, 407) propose a radical strategy of 'rethinking and redefining heteronormative household models' which could 'include new models of community kitchens, sharing cooking and food preparation across households, and a push for shaking up household divisions of labor that emphasizes the joys and pleasures as well as the work of food provision'.

More celebratory approaches to gender and food sovereignty shift attention from the 'workings of the wider political economy' (Razavi 2009, 211) in shaping gendered resource access to and control of environmental resources and socio-political processes, as well as on 'more systemic forms of discrimination that reinforce gender inequalities' (Addison and Schnurr 2016, 963), to focus on everyday life expressions of food sovereignty by peasant, black, and Indigenous women. This literature focuses on documenting women's labor, knowledge, networks of cooperation, cosmovisions and processes of decolonial praxis (Cid-Aguayo and Latta 2015; Pande and Jha 2016; Castro 2020; Christina, Turatti, and Mejía 2021). As such, scholarship shifts its attention on women's subordination, from 'left behind' (Zhang 2020) or 'poor things' (Castro 2020) as is characteristic of

the discourses of gender and development policy and practice (Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007) – to emphasize women’s agency and struggles for sustaining ecologically-viable livelihoods as well as on women’s leadership in collective struggles for justice and food sovereignty.

However, as some authors claim, there are studies within this strand that ignore the major dilemma of ‘how to value women’s reproductive work with food [...] without reinscribing the subordinate status associated with traditional gender divisions of labor’ (Sachs and Patel-Campillo 2014, 406). For instance, some literature on agroecology often reproduces the ‘myth’ of women’s ‘heroic’ capacity to survive (González de la Rocha 2007), to exercise autonomy (Cornwall 2007), or save the environment (Leach 2007), while omitting increases in women’s workload and corresponding difficulties in political participation (Trevilla-Espinal et al. 2021; Mestmacher and Braun 2021). These critiques resemble earlier critiques to ecofeminist works on peasant women, which charged women with essentialized notions of women’s higher caring nature in relation to rural communities and the environment without paying attention to the material sources of the dominance of men over women based on economic advantage and political power, while also ignoring women’s own aspirations to overcome their material dependence on nature for making their livelihoods (Agarwal 1994).

Grounded in renewed ecofeminist perspectives, current research on gender equality and food sovereignty has integrated this materialist feminist criticism while emphasizing social inequalities as historically constructed. These novel perspectives stress that making visible women’s care labor, to which ‘women have been tasked and relegated strictly’ (Silveira et al. 2021, 443), is about ‘placing life at the center of social organization’ (Silveira et al. 2021, 430). This is done not to reinscribe any subordinate status of women; instead, it is understood as an important aspect of struggles to build ‘alternatives towards the sustainability of [human and natural] life’ while dismantling the social inequalities imposed by ‘heteropatriarchy, capitalism and colonialism’ (Trevilla-Espinal et al. 2021, 1–2). This research, however, tends to pay less attention to the interplay between structures, materialities and agency in shaping gender relations and overcoming structures of oppression, with all its contradictions and possibilities. As O’Laughlin (2021, 17) explains, in understanding how life is reproduced, ‘one must understand not just the work that makes, sustains and cares for life but also the sources of contingency’.

All these concerns have informed more nuanced approaches to gender and food sovereignty. Diverse studies emphasize the relevance of specifically addressing gender equality in efforts to move forward food sovereignty. For instance, Bezner-Kerr et al.’s (2019) research on advancing agroecology in Malawi argues how crucial it was to use an intersectional approach and participatory feminist methodologies to act upon intra-household inequalities and gendered divisions of labor. In relation to land reforms, studies have shown how Indigenous and peasant women struggle for the recognition and protection of customary and communal rights while demanding participation and egalitarian change in customary rule and governance structures and gender-responsive redistributive land reforms (Monsalve 2006; Collins 2018; Deere 2017).

Another important, but still incipient strand of this more nuanced literature, also focuses on women’s lived experience (as does the celebratory strand), but with emphasis on the relational dimensions of power. These studies give insights ‘into how power operates, not only through top down processes but also through individual and collective



agency' (Turner et al. 2020, 5) by drawing attention to how historical processes of colonization, marginalization and exploitation, most recently under the expansion of capitalism and neoliberalism, are engaged with, negotiated and resisted 'from below' in everyday life (Figueroa 2015). They also allow for more complex understandings of gendered subjectivity and power that challenge gender approaches that rest predominantly on fixed notions of the autonomous subject. In these perspectives, women are neither 'heroines' nor 'victims', and gender relations are seen as complex and context specific.

A focus on women's lived experiences from a relational approach to power is closer to strands of social reproduction feminism in which the 'ensemble of practices that reproduce social life are simultaneously organized via multiple relations of domination and power' (McNally 2017, 109).<sup>4</sup> It thus embeds a call for understanding lived experience in its multiple layers and contradictions, and as part of a broader set of social relations. In this social reproduction feminist perspective, the distinct parts of a social whole are internally related; that is, they mediate each other and in doing so constitute each other and the whole as a 'living organism'. As such, patriarchy and capitalism, as well as racism and other forms of oppression, are understood as being differentiated relations embedded in the same moving totality, rather than autonomous spheres that intersect. Likewise, production and reproduction are necessarily combined as concrete moments of an articulated, and contradictory social totality. In short, it provides an understanding of the making and reproduction of (everyday) life in contemporary capitalism in its historically specific relations of gender, racial and other forms of oppression; and the ways in which women's daily practices reproduce, reconstruct, and transform that social totality, and how they collectively mobilize to change it.

The focus on women's lived experiences from a view of power as relational also sits well with more performative notions of gender which highlight how gender identity and power relations are inscribed in everyday embodied practices and socio-political processes, and the intersection of various axes of power. This allows research to move beyond simplistic, fixed understandings of gendered divisions and power relations. For instance, in analyzing peasant women struggles for food sovereignty in Latin America, Brochner (2014, 257–262) argues that 'the bond women have with this [food sovereignty] claim is related to the social roles they play regarding identities and sexual division of labour' that they then mobilize to challenge gender inequality and power relations at various scales. The role of gender-oriented pedagogy and education in peasant schools of Via Campesina has also been highlighted as key tools for 'deconstructing hegemonic gendered habitus' (Schwendler and Thompson 2017, 101), and generating critical thought to challenge entrenched oppression (Gallar-Hernández 2021; Mann 2019; Meek et al. 2017; Meek and Tarlau 2016).

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<sup>4</sup>While there is an extensive literature on social reproduction theory that centers on analyzing the role of invisibilized labor in reproducing the labor force in capitalist societies, as Ferguson (n.d) explains, social reproduction feminism focuses on 'the ways in which the daily and generational renewal of human life (and thus of human labour power) is absolutely essential to the decade-over-decade tenacity not merely of inequality, but of capitalism'. As she stresses, 'the 'production of goods and services and the production of life are part of one integrated process'' thus leading to the understanding 'that race and gender oppression occur capitalistically'. Also see Brent's (2022) ground-breaking theoretical framework entitled 'regimes of agrarian social reproduction' that focuses on the forces, processes, politics, consequences and contestation of three key dimensions of social reproduction in an agrarian context: generational reproduction, collective reproduction and systemic reproduction.



A compelling analysis of women's activism in shaping LVC's work and politics on gender issues and food sovereignty has yet to emerge. We are convinced that such an analysis could provide important insights into the relationship between food sovereignty and feminist politics. Inspired by the debates on women, gender and food sovereignty, this paper aims to contribute to this effort.

### **3. La Via Campesina's approach to gender: embedding feminism in food sovereignty**

Feminist work within LVC has been incremental yet powerful. This work has been initiated and led by peasant and rural women within the movement since its inception. A first, and crucial step for building a feminist politics from below, has focused on ensuring that all women have a voice and meaningfully participate in the political life of the movement. For this, an important dimension of women's feminist work has been organizational: how best to tackle men's dominance in spaces and structures of participation and representation? Three feminist elements of this work have been fundamental: the creation of autonomous spaces for women, the implementation of a parity politics, and the integration of a gender lens into the analysis and proposals of the movement. Another dimension of women's feminist work has centered on cultivating an interrelation between theory and praxis, involving a capacity to interpret the world from women's lived experiences, in all their diversity, and to set in motion specific measures and political demands to effect transformational change. This entailed advancing an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and intersectional feminist framework, and put forward practical mechanisms for acting upon the structural, material, and symbolic/cultural factors that shape asymmetrical relations of power and privilege. In this section, we first shed light on women's organizational feminist work within LVC, and second, we analyze more in detail the feminist politics being built by women, and the movement as a whole.

#### **3.1. Organizational challenges of building a feminism from below**

The history of creating women's only spaces within the LVC has already been traced and analyzed (Desmarais 2003, 2007; Via Campesina 2021b; Wiebe 2013), but it is worth briefly highlighting some key moments of that journey to understand its significance for tackling organizational challenges in building a feminism from below.

Although women leaders did participate in the founding conference of LVC in Mons Belgium in 1993 (La Via Campesina 1993), it was three years later that the movement took concrete action to increase women's representation and participation. Women, representing 20% of delegates the Second International Conference in Tlaxcala Mexico, gathered together in a Working Group entitled 'Rural Development, Living and Working Conditions and Women' (thereafter, Tlaxcala Working Group) and came to consensus on a number of key points including: First, that 'women of the Via Campesina must formulate a statement in order to drive forward a more just and democratic participation of women'; and second, that women 'establish links among the various countries that will allow for a more detailed understanding of the work that we develop as women within the Via Campesina' (La Via Campesina 1996a, 34). This call, among others made by the Tlaxcala Working Group along with the proposals emerging from a meeting convened

by women (La Via Campesina 1996a, 59–60), were instrumental in driving the movement to begin to address gender inequalities by forming a Women's Committee (subsequently called the Women's Commission then the Women's Articulation) whose work was to 'develop strategies, mechanisms and a plan of action to ensure women's equal participation and representation at all levels of *Vía Campesina*, and establish coordination and communication among women' (Minutes of Women's Commission's first meeting held in 1996; cited in Desmarais 2007, 163).

LVC's Women's Commission accomplished much over a short period of time. Not only did it provide women a safer space for women to be present and engage in debate,<sup>5</sup> it also created other women's politically significant autonomous spaces. For example, it organized women's meetings immediately prior major international events where *Via Campesina* delegations gathered (i.e. World Food Summits, meetings of the World Trade Organization, etc.) and it collaborated with regional leaders of the *Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo* (CLOC) and ASOCODE in Central America to hold women's workshops to analyze the gender dimensions of trade, structural adjustment programs, rural precarity, resistance strategies and women's leadership. Women leaders in Asia organized similar exchanges. Largely as a result of this regional and international work, the Women's Commission successfully organized the First International Women's Assembly held in 2000 just prior to LVC's III International Conference in Bangalore, India.

This Women Assembly advanced women's struggles within *Via Campesina* in two significant ways. First, it prompted LVC's III International Conference to agree to changing the movement's structure to ensure gender parity in its leadership and further legitimizing women's spaces. That is, LVC's International Coordinating Committee (ICC) would now double in size, from one to two elected coordinators per region (one woman and one man) with the women Regional Coordinators forming the International Women's Commission (now called the International Women's Articulation) which would meet prior to each ICC meeting (Desmarais 2003, 2007). It is worth noting that prior to this change, women representatives to the Women's Commission were appointed rather than elected and only one of the eight Regional Coordinators was a woman. Second, the Women's Assembly and subsequently the Conference discussed a Gender Position document (La Via Campesina 2000a) that included a detailed action plan, thus pushing the movement to engage more deeply in debates about how to integrate gender as transversal in the everyday political life of the movement.

This precedent-setting First Women's Assembly set the stage for how LVC would begin addressing male domination within the movement by adopting parity as a key organizational principle in the movement. Moreover, LVC's decision-making and policy-setting processes now regularly include holding a Women's Assembly prior to each of the movement's much larger International Conferences that take place every four years. Through these Assemblies, *Via Campesina* women have worked to debate and integrate

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<sup>5</sup>Providing a safer space for women, separate from spaces dominated by men's privilege (household, organizations, etc.), is crucial to recognize and tackle the fundamental role of patriarchal ideology and related power relations in devaluing women's productive and reproductive labor while also dismissing women's views, needs, interests, and aspirations as secondary thus hindering subjectivity formation and often making it more difficult for women to mobilize and speak out. These autonomous spaces assist women to become protagonists in making their own history.

women's views, needs, interests, and priorities into the movements' politics and infuse a feminist perspective in its conceptualizations of food sovereignty.

An examination of the declarations and main documents of LVC's international gatherings demonstrates how women's analyses and demands have flowed into and expanded the content of LVC's International Conferences. Although most of the Conference declarations do not go into great detail about gender issues – nor do they present a list of gender-related demands as these are reflected in the Women's Assembly declarations that are published alongside those of the Conferences – the influence of women is certainly evident. As brief examples, Conference declarations include referencing the patriarchal system and its entanglement with the machinations of capitalism in 2004, the launching of the World Campaign 'For an End to Violence Against Women' in 2008, and the explicit pronouncement of the 'feminist character' of the movement in 2017 (La Via Campesina 2004b, 2008b, 2017c), all of which were debated previously in the Women's Assemblies. Having such clear positions in LVC's international declarations is critical since these publically express the movement's politics by specifying its internal and external struggles while also committing LVC as a whole to specific principles and lines of action.

Women's autonomous spaces, from the Women's Commission/Articulation to the Women's Assemblies, have been critical for women from different geographies and with diverse lived experiences to come together to share their experiences of struggle; voice their shared and specific concerns, needs and interests; engage in collective analysis; and strategize collectively on how to more effectively address gender inequalities in rural areas and the food system, and challenge male domination in their own rural organizations and within LVC itself (Desmarais 2003, 2007). Over years of hard work, persistence and patience accompanied by a commitment and engagement in collective self-reflection, mobilization and transnational solidarity, LVC women established a collective identity as peasant women united in their struggles for women's dignity and rights in their homes, farms, organizations, communities, and broader society in efforts to build a different world based on food sovereignty. Although these spaces are filled with numerous expressions of solidarity and are certainly a manifestation of women's increased participation, representation, visibility and power within the movement, they are not free of tensions and conflicts, regional dominance, and exclusion (Desmarais 2007, 161–181).<sup>6</sup> How women navigate these tensions and conflicts is an on-going challenge that requires much attention to particularities and intersectional differences, as well as dedication of time to share experiences and create bonds of solidarity. We now turn to exploring how peasant and rural women's activism within Via Campesina has contributed to foster a particular feminist perspective of food sovereignty.

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<sup>6</sup>Desmarais' discussion of the first six years of the Women's Commission examines the accomplishments and the multi-dimensional challenges to women's participation in the autonomous spaces created by the movement. In addition to the tensions already mentioned, she stresses that key issues included the lack of consistency of representation in the Women's Commission; uneven and irregular representation among the regions; the question of legitimacy since commission members were not initially elected in all regions but instead appointed; a lack of understanding among the representatives of the existing regional gender inequalities and different strategies women were using to addressing these; and inequality among the regions in women's regional and international involvement, that is, in work beyond the local.

### **3.2. Radicalizing food sovereignty with a feminist perspective**

The organizational feminist work of women within LVC was paralleled by an intense engagement in debate and strategizing on women's rights and gender issues, effectively contributing to radicalizing food sovereignty with a feminist perspective. A key aspect of women's feminist activism involved developing a feminist framework that is anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, and intersectional, while more recently assuming a 'popular and peasant' feminist political orientation. This conceptualization process was supported by developing another key aspect of women's feminist activism: a praxis for deconstructing and transforming gendered power relations and addressing gendered divisions of labor. This subsection delves into these elements of women's activism in constructing a feminist from below.

#### **3.2.1. From feminism as equal rights to an anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, and intersectional feminism**

The Gender Position (2000a) that was discussed at LVC's III International Conference outlined women's key demands covering a wide range of issues including: full and equal representation, political participation and decision-making; end to all forms of violence against women; equal access to land, credit and training; respect and protection of traditional knowledge; fair and equal wages; access to healthcare and education; and protection of the environment. While the position demonstrates a profound understanding of the gender dimensions of the global food system, including how it 'devalues the reproductive, regenerative forces both of the natural world and in human society', it does not develop an analysis of the causes of gender injustice.

Four years later, the Second Women's Assembly Declaration, clearly names the enemy: 'As women we demand respect for all our rights, we reject the patriarchal system and all of its discriminatory manifestations' (La Via Campesina 2004a). Three days later, the IV Via Campesina International Conference points to patriarchy and asserts a commitment 'to the struggle against the patriarchal system that only accentuates the aberrations of capitalism' (La Via Campesina 2004b). Here, patriarchy is understood as being part of, and a reinforcing structure of capitalist forces of domination, alienation, oppression, dispossession, and exploitation. This approach is then moved forward in subsequent Women's Assemblies and International Conferences by also adding an intersectional perspective. For example, while the Nyéléni Declaration (2007b) asserted that 'food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations', the Maputo Women's Assembly Declaration in 2008 reflects a deepened understanding of how different aspects of discrimination overlap with gender. As the document makes explicit,

we recognize that all women suffer discrimination; nevertheless, not all women are discriminated against equally [...] women suffer discrimination of class, gender, ethnicity, sex, aesthetics, among others. This complexity is necessary to be assumed both as a political expression for the denunciation of discrimination, as well as from a perspective seeking a different kind of society. (La Via Campesina 2008a)

This intersectional perspective clearly demonstrates that in LVC there is awareness that 'women are not all the same' in suffering oppressions, and that these multiple,

overlapping and intersecting oppressions must be recognized and reflected in the movement's ways of organizing and in its proposals. It also expresses an understanding of the complexity of gender identity and power relations in forming a collective identity and the social actor.

The Jakarta Call, influenced by the IV Women's Assembly and resulting Manifesto in 2013, advances an even more robust view of intersectionality. Women's discrimination may be the result of the combination of multiple oppressions, but 'the total equality of women and men' is only possible by conjointly 'rejecting capitalism, patriarchy, xenophobia, homophobia and discrimination based on race and ethnicity' (La Via Campesina 2013b). This is compatible with recent ecofeminist perspectives on the multiple, intersecting forms of social hierarchy and oppression affecting women as well as with social reproduction feminist views of relations of power based on sex or gender as concrete moments of an articulated, complex, and contradictory moving totality.

### 3.2.2. *The emergence of a 'popular and peasant feminism'*

No doubt inspired by the Fourth and Fifth Women's Assemblies that both spoke of 'popular' and 'peasant feminism', the most recent International Conference of Via Campesina (held in Derio, Basque Country) boldly underlines the 'feminist character' of the movement by declaring that 'patriarchy is the enemy of our movement' while committing itself to building 'a peasant feminist movement within La Via Campesina' (La Via Campesina 2017c). As the Derio Women's Assembly clarified, this is a 'peasant and popular feminism' that:

recognises our cultural diversity and the very different conditions that we face in each region, country and place. We are building it from the daily struggles which women across the planet fight. Struggles for our autonomy, social transformation, the defence and protection of peasant agriculture, and food sovereignty. From this, new men and women will emerge with new gender relationships based on equality, respect, cooperation and mutual recognition. *This feminism is transformative, rebellious and autonomous.* [our emphasis] We are building it collectively through reflection and concrete actions against the capital and the patriarchy. (La Via Campesina 2017a)

The concept of peasant and popular feminism, loosely defined as being anti-capitalist and rooted in the popular classes of indigenous, black, rural and peasant women, was first proposed by the women of LVC's regional organization, the CLOC. While the Jakarta Women's Assembly (2013a) only briefly introduced the concept, the Women's Assembly at Derio (2017a) initiated a more robust (yet still limited) discussion that did raise questions and critiques of its usefulness in all LVC regions. For instance, as one Asian delegate at the Women's Assembly in Derio pointed out, in some rural areas, feminism is not part of the local lexicon.

Consequently, the Women's Assembly recognized the need to create spaces for further debate within the movement: 'This feminism must also be nourished with feminist training for us and for all our organisations. Our movements must guarantee spaces solely for women in which together we can strengthen our autonomy'<sup>7</sup> (La Via Campesina 2017a).

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<sup>7</sup>It is important to note that the English term 'training' fails to capture the connotations of political consciousness-raising and collective analysis encompassed in the Spanish term 'formación' and the French 'formation' that are used in LVC documents. We could not think of an English word that adequately captures this more full meaning.

As part of its commitment to ‘training’ and debate, the movement recently released a 75-page document aimed to foster learning, reflection and discussion entitled ‘The path of peasant and popular feminism in La Via Campesina’ (La Via Campesina 2021b), which discusses the historical trajectory of peasant and rural women’s struggles within LVC for gender equality, the movement’s work on gender issues at international fora, and further useful resources.

By affirming the notion of a peasant and popular feminism, Via Campesina women aim to explicitly assert LVC’s political identity as clearly feminist, and that this feminism will influence its political praxis as well as build food sovereignty as an expression of feminist politics. As the Derio Youth Declaration states, ‘there is no food sovereignty or justice without feminism and equality of all people’ (La Via Campesina 2017b). That it is only recently that Via Campesina women are using a discourse of feminism is interesting on a number of fronts, especially since gender equality has been on the agenda (both organizationally and politically) throughout much of the movement’s trajectory, and in many cases, it has been central to some of its organizations. Here we venture some preliminary observations. First, since many Via Campesina women come from different parts of the world with diverse rural feminist traditions, it is very likely that they did not seek to impose a particular feminist strand on the whole movement. Second, it is also possible that the historical tensions between rural and urban women’s movements in many regions would spur some rural women’s organizations to reject the term ‘feminism’ because of the urban-centric positioning of much feminist theorizing. In fact, according to LVC, the wording ‘peasant and popular feminism’ was adopted expressly to distinguish the movement’s feminist politics from liberal, urban-based, upper- and middle-class strands of feminism (La Via Campesina 2021b).

Although peasant and popular feminism remains vague (and perhaps purposefully so), we certainly get a better sense of its roots and essence by examining the issues that women’s activism has focused on over the years. We begin by discussing women’s struggles for gender parity and ending violence against women as key tools for tackling gender inequalities that are entrenched in the everyday life of rural organizations, as well as in women’s lives in the countryside and food systems. Next, we look at another key issue at the heart of Via Campesina women’s activism, the gendered divisions of labor and how it relates to control over the means of production and conditions of reproduction. This division is analytical, as Via Campesina women combine all of these struggles as indivisible parts of a broader struggle for transforming gender relations through food sovereignty.

### ***3.2.3. Deconstructing and transforming gender: tackling oppressive relations of power and privilege in rural organizations and the countryside***

LVC has expanded and deepened the meaning and practice of parity over time to move beyond equal rights to transforming oppressive power relations between men and women. At its III International Conference, parity was understood as a mechanism through which to push for systematically erasing the barriers to the full democratic participation and leadership of women as well as to ‘model open, democratic processes within our movement’ (La Via Campesina 2000b). Four years later, at the IV International Conference, LVC advances a more complex understanding of gender parity. In asserting that the movement ‘will work hard to ensure that the numerical gender parity is

translated into real changes in the power relations between men and women in our movement' (La Via Campesina 2004b), LVC is clearly recognizing the limitations of equal rights in the absence of challenging asymmetrical power relations that undergird gender inequalities.

Subsequently, the Maputo Declaration draws attention to 'the goal of achieving that complex but necessary *true* gender parity in all spaces and organs of debate, discussion, analysis and decision-making' (La Via Campesina 2008b, emphasis added). The use of the word 'true' suggests an understanding that formal parity must act as a stimulus for deeply changing gender relations within its membership, with clear reflections in the political life of the movement. Most recently, the Fifth Women's Assembly in 2017 pushed this perspective even further. In a section entitled 'Regarding our right and duty to participate in political processes and decision making', the Assembly Declaration acknowledges that while the political participation of women has increased within the movement, these changes have not been 'translated into practical policies for their daily lives, the States or our organizations' and the member organizations of LVC are called 'to be at the forefront of the changes necessary to ensure women's full participation, especially in decision making, in defining strategies and in the responsibilities of our representatives' (La Via Campesina 2017a).

Parallel to Via Campesina women's engagement in parity politics in the struggle against gender inequalities, they have placed the fight against all forms of violence against women – within society at large, the movement and its member organizations, on farms and in households – as a priority line of action. The Gender Position discussed at the First Women's Assembly was the first of the key documents to speak of violence against women by clearly recognizing the 'sexual as well as physical abuse of women and girls' in processes of intimidation, displacement and militarization in the countryside, calling for an end to these human rights violations (La Via Campesina 2000a). This document also emphasizes respecting the 'right of women to be free from domestic violence' considering that 'the confidence, self-esteem and human potential of women is cruelly undermined by the subjugation and abuse many experiences within their own homes' (La Via Campesina 2000a). The São Paulo Declaration expands the notion of violence against women by considering it not only 'criminal violence' but that it is also structural and includes the marginalization effects of 'the privatization of basic services, the concentration of land ownership, and the destruction of local markets' (La Via Campesina 2004b). In reiterating aspects of the Gender Position, here violence also includes structural factors beyond physical, sexual and psychological direct harm.

By 2008, LVC takes a more public and proactive stance to join the struggle to end violence against women. Whereas the previous declarations identified the problem and its multiple dimensions, the Maputo Declaration presents an analysis of the origins, causes, and implications of violence against women for the peasant movement; it also signals a path forward:

One issue was very clear in this V conference, that all the forms of violence that women face in our societies – among them physical, economic, social, cultural and macho violence, and violence based on differences of power – are also present in rural communities, and as a result, in our organizations. This, in addition to being a principal source of injustice, also limits the success of our struggles. We recognize the intimate relationships between capitalism, patriarchy, machismo and neoliberalism, in detriment to the women peasants and farmers of the



world. All of us together, women and men of La Via Campesina, make a responsible commitment to build new and better human relationships among us, as a necessary part of the construction of the new societies to which we aspire. For this reason during this V Conference we decided to break the silence on these issues, and are launching the World Campaign 'For an End to Violence Against Women'. (La Via Campesina 2008b)

There are some critical aspects of this campaign that are worth noting. First, it recognizes that violence against women is multidimensional, not geographically specific, and has its roots in structural sexism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Second, it acknowledges that hegemonic masculinity benefits from and perpetuates neoliberalism which directly destroys peasant's livelihoods. Advancing food sovereignty thus involves overcoming these multiple, overlapping, and intertwined social systems of oppression. Third, ending violence against women is a pre-requisite to implementing food sovereignty. This involves not only tackling the structures of oppression, but it is also fundamentally about constructing new gender relations, free of oppressions, from the household to the global food system. As the Maputo Declaration urges: 'If we do not eradicate violence towards women within our movement, we will not advance in our struggles, and if we do not create new gender relations, we will not be able to build a new society' (La Via Campesina 2008b). As such, this is a commitment for each woman and man in their own spaces of living, working, and organizing to effect change in the way they interact and relate to others as pathways to deconstruct differences of gender and transform gender relations. It is also a call for a conjoined fight for both gender equality and food sovereignty. This perspective of power as relational – considering how top down processes but also individual and collective agency shape perceptions of ourselves and of our relations to others, our behaviors and actions – is attentive to the complexities of oppression and to the contingent ways in which it can be challenged in everyday life and through collective struggles. It also opens room for a more performative notion of gender as it calls for men to be active in challenging hegemonic masculinity.

LVC's commitment to ending gender-based violence continues while simultaneously expanding an understanding of what this violence means and encompasses. As evidence, the Jakarta Call in 2013 reasserts an understanding of the multi-dimensional nature of violence against women that is 'domestic, social and institutional', including this as a universal phenomenon that occurs in both 'rural and urban areas' (La Via Campesina 2013b). The Derio Declaration, resulting from the movement's most recent international conference, does not mention the campaign but reiterates a commitment to continue to fight against 'all forms of violence against women: physical, sexual, psychological, and economic' while signaling the importance of also 'increasing our capacities to understand and create positive environments around gender, within our organizations and in our alliances. The lack of tolerance for diversity is part of the process of dispossession of rural youth. A diverse, non-violent and inclusive countryside is fundamental for La Via Campesina' (La Via Campesina 2017c). Thus, for the first time, a LVC Conference expands gender to include a concern about gender diversity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The inclusion of a gender diversity concern in the International Declaration was most certainly influenced by the Youth Declaration (La Via Campesina 2017b), which says: 'There is no food sovereignty or justice without feminism and equality of all peoples. We must recognize and respect diversity of all forms, including race, gender, sexuality and class. We will root out patriarchy wherever it exists'.

### ***3.2.4. Addressing gendered divisions of labor: struggles for the control over the means of production and conditions of reproduction***

Building new gender relations moves beyond addressing the cultural/symbolic expressions of oppression to also deal with structures and materialities in women's lived experiences. From here emerges Via Campesina women's and subsequently the movement's attention to the issue of gendered divisions of labor and the relationship between production and reproduction.

An examination of LVC's declarations reveals that women's peasant labor is highlighted while less attention is given to waged women labor.<sup>9</sup> In approaching women's labor in family farming, the focus is on women's role in both productive and reproductive labor. There is a persistent call to recognize and appreciate women's labor in food production as first articulated in the Tlaxcala Declaration (La Via Campesina 1996b), no doubt influenced by debates within the Tlaxcala Working Group and a separate women's meeting. At Bangalore, the Gender Position demanded respect for women's traditional knowledge against corporate theft and patenting of genetic resources as well as protection of 'their ability to continue the vital role of protecting and enhancing biodiversity' in their role in food production (La Via Campesina 2000a). The Women's Declaration on Food Sovereignty at Nyéléni, also reaffirms the need for the 'recognition and respect of women's roles and rights in food production' (La Via Campesina 2007a). The call for recognizing the role of women in food production is especially relevant as

Women, who throughout history have been the creators of knowledge about food and agriculture, who still produce up to 80% of the food in the world's poorest countries and are today the principal guardians of biodiversity and agricultural seeds, are particularly affected by neo-liberal and sexist policies.

We suffer the dramatic consequences of these policies: poverty, inadequate access to resources, patents on living organisms, rural exodus and forced migration, war and all forms of physical and sexual violence. Monocultures, including those dedicated to agrofuels, and the widespread use of chemicals and genetically-modified organisms have a harmful effect on the environment and on human health, particularly reproductive health.

The industrial model and the transnationals threaten the very existence of peasant agriculture, small-scale fishing and herding, as well as the small-scale preparation and sale of food in both urban and rural environments, all sectors where women play a major role. (La Via Campesina 2007a)

Via Campesina women are thus calling attention to their daily realities that are threatened by the neoliberal global food system and sexist policies, while struggling for the recognition of their labor, knowledge, and rights to a dignified life and the power to make decisions on their own terms regarding their modes of existence and ways to improve their livelihoods. They also highlight how engagement in agriculture contributes to the

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<sup>9</sup>Women's waged labor including remuneration as well as health and safety issues are also key concerns. At the first International Women's Commission meeting back in 1996, for example, in the context of women working as farm workers, Via Campesina women insisted that food sovereignty include the need to move 'to organic production or certainly a drastic reduction in the use of health-endangering chemical inputs and an immediate stop to the use of health-endangering chemical inputs and an immediate stop to the export of banned agro-chemicals' (Cited in Desmarais 2007, 164). Subsequently, the Gender Position does focus on equal wages: 'Women who work in the agriculture or rural service sectors for wages must be given wages equal to those of their male counterparts. Wage discrimination on the basis of gender is a fundamental injustice against women' (La Via Campesina 2000a).

reproduction of life, at the daily and generational level. It is precisely around these everyday engagements that women mobilize, taking them as sources of strength, empowerment and leadership. The environmental dimension of women's labor in food production – which directly depends upon and impacts nature – emerges precisely from their lived experiences, as shaped by structures and human praxis, not from any natural female attribute. The ecofeminist perspective embodied here is rooted in women's own existence and struggles for maintaining and reproducing their own lives (and the lives of others), while envisioning the building of alternatives from their own knowledge and experiences. If we consider the ecological question as fundamental in the contemporary agrarian question (Watts 2021), then women are certainly also at the forefront of this struggle.

Women's role in reproductive labor has also been a key concern among Via Campesina women. As early as 1996, the Tlaxcala Working Group pointed out that 'Women do not have access to decision-making processes in rural areas. They are assigned roles that limit the development of their abilities since they are left to only take care of the home and children' (La Via Campesina 1996a, 33). The last two Women's Assemblies also address reproductive labor. While the Jakarta Women's Assembly Declaration calls for recognizing and appreciating women's productive and reproductive labor (but without further development), the Derio Women's Assembly Declaration explicitly demands 'that our productive work be recognized and that our reproductive and care work be valued, shared and collectively taken care of. This is essential if we are to fully participate'<sup>10</sup> (La Via Campesina 2017a). It is worth noting here the call for sharing and socializing care work. This is about acting upon intra-households inequalities and redistributing the workload in reproduction, thus potentially challenging patriarchal and heteronormative family models. But it is also about ensuring rural women's access to care-related public services along with specific progressive social policies that enable a reduction of the reproductive workload within the family unit and ensure women's protection in illness, maternity, retirement, etc., with potential positive effects on women's political participation. LVC women are focussing on the need of specifically addressing gender inequalities at farms and households, both by changing interpersonal relationships and by demanding for gender-responsive policies in rural areas, as a means for advancing a feminist politics of food sovereignty.

The struggle for access and control over land and other productive resources has long been central in tackling gendered divisions of labor. The Tlaxcala Working Group proposed that the right to land could only be realized 'through integral agrarian reform that democratizes land ownership' (La Via Campesina 1996a, 33). Six months later, in presenting its vision at the World Food Summit in Rome, LVC affirms that,

Women play a central role in household and community food sovereignty. Hence they have an inherent right to resources for food production, land, credit, capital, technology, education and social services, and equal opportunity to develop and employ their skills.

[...]

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<sup>10</sup>In LVC, and in our analysis, the distinction between productive and reproductive labor is not related to the production of exchange- or surplus-value vs. the generation of use-values, respectively. Women's labor in food production, even if outside commodity markets, is considered as productive labor. The focus is on gendered divisions of labor that tend to visibilize men's work, and downplay women's work in agriculture (food production, transformation, and commerce), while relegating women's work to the domestic sphere.

Peasant families, especially women, must have access to productive land, credit, technology, markets and extension services. (La Via Campesina 1996c)

Over the years, women's access to land has been *central* to food sovereignty, a demand that subsequent Women's Assemblies, without fail, tenaciously revisit. For example, the Bangalore Conference Gender Position highlighted a commitment 'to ensuring that women gain security of tenure of land' (La Via Campesina 2000a); the São Paulo Women's Assembly Declaration demanded that 'States implement measures that guarantee [...] [women's] access to land' (La Via Campesina 2004a); and the Nyéléni Conference insisted that women be fully included in discussions of building a 'genuine and integral agrarian reform [...] with equal rights for women and men' (La Via Campesina 2007b). Although the Maputo Women's Assembly Declaration also references the need for a 'comprehensive agrarian reform in order to eliminate all forms of violence generated by capitalist modes of production' (La Via Campesina 2008a), it is the Jakarta Women's Assembly Manifesto that specifies the necessary components of a comprehensive agrarian reform to achieve gender equality:

We women demand a comprehensive Agrarian Reform to redistribute land with our full participation and integration through 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 a dignified and fair life for us. (La Via Campesina 2013a)

The demand for a gender-responsive agrarian reform is transposed into the Jakarta Call although in a much simplified way.

For Via Campesina women, recognizing women's role as both producers and reproducers while challenging gendered divisions of labor are central in their activism and proposals for influencing the movement's internal functioning and the politics of food sovereignty. This is done by advancing proposals, demands, and concrete measures to tackle structural factors as well as sexism within the movement, rural organizations, and society at large, thus embodying a perspective of power as relational. This is the only way, for instance, of ensuring women's full political participation, which is certainly a condition for addressing issues of gender equality in rural areas and food systems. Moreover, the valuation and recognition of women's labor sits along a process of radically politicizing the domestic sphere and rural societies in ways that challenges the views, practices, mechanisms, and ideologies that naturalize women's role as carers. Finally, women actively struggle to alter the traditional family farm structure, stripping it from patriarchy and sexism. Recent debates within the movement around sexual and gender diversity also open grounds for discussing other models of living and working the land beyond the heteronormative, patriarchal model (La Via Campesina 2016, 2017d, 2019).

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

An analysis of LVC's key declarations and accompanying documents reveals that in struggling for a society 'free of oppression and inequality between men and women' (La Via Campesina 2007b), four demands are integral to LVC's politics of food sovereignty: ensure women's equitable access to and control over productive resources and social rights; guarantee women's equal representation and participation in food politics and

policy-making; end to *all* forms of violence against women; and, construct new gender relations by tackling gendered divisions of labor and sexism. This paper has explored how women have articulated and mobilized these demands to shape a feminist politics within the movement. Our analysis demonstrates that LVC's feminist politics emerged from women's decades-long efforts of self-organization, debate, strategizing, and struggle. Over the years, women have succeeded to some extent in inserting women's struggles for gender equality as a priority in LVC's everyday activity, spaces of debate and representation, interaction with other social movements and civil society organizations, proposals, and as central to building food sovereignty. This is the fruit of much 'invention and hard work', work that remains on-going and not free of challenges. Women's activism – not exclusively on women's rights and gender issues – has been crucial for strengthening and expanding LVC's politics and the movement itself by infusing a feminist perspective of food sovereignty.

Shortly following LVC's inception, women recognized with political clarity that addressing gender equality was critical to advancing peasant struggles. Rather than an 'add but do not stir' approach, women understood that without dealing with asymmetrical power relations within the movement, society at large, and in everyday life – given the imbricated relationships between capitalism, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression – no 'peasant unity' would be effectively possible. For this, creating and strengthening the autonomous organization of women has been critical. The strategies and actions mobilized through the autonomous organization of women did create the necessary political spaces to debate and construct proposals stemming from peasant women differentiated everyday experiences of oppression, thus contributing to processes of subject formation, leadership, and the creation of 'peasant women' as a collective social actor. Although these are not free of tensions and conflicts and also duplicate women's domains of militancy and activism thus adding to their workload, the spaces have been fundamental for women's political autonomy and building the collective capacity to challenge patriarchal privilege, and effect change within the movement as well as potentially within their own organizations, farms, and households. It is hard to imagine how debates on capitalism, patriarchy, social transformation, parity, violence, reproductive labor, etc., would have developed within LVC, and be constitutive of LVC's politics, without the creation, occupation and functioning of these spaces. Moreover, the long experience of women in self-organizing into autonomous spaces and subsequent activism may offer valuable learnings for the potential need for the self-organization within LVC of other (gender) oppressed minorities.

LVC's feminist politics have evolved from initial concerns over gender inequalities and calls for equal rights, to include a view of women's oppression as being systemic, structural, and rooted in capitalism-driven patriarchy, and recognition that women's lives differ in significant ways (based on class, race, ethnicity, age, etc.). This multi-pronged analysis led Via Campesina women and the movement to adopt an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and intersectional lens, and to openly embrace a feminist stance, what they now explicitly call a 'peasant and popular feminism'. Although the public declaration of feminism is recent, women's years of activism within LVC exhibits clear connections with feminism. The issues women raised and their initiatives emerged in the international spaces of debate within the movement but are also linked to many Via Campesina women

leaders' history of engagement and daily struggle in and with feminist activism in their own locales, organizations, movements, countries and/or regions.

In LVC, women's activism has included advancing diverse mechanisms for tackling social divides and relations of power and privilege in society at large, and particularly in households, rural communities and at all levels of peasant organizing (local, national, regional and transnational). In these efforts, women have paid attention to the impact of structures as well as the material and cultural/symbolic factors of oppression. They have done this by conceptualizing parity as a mechanism for changing gender relations on the ground in everyday life; by addressing violence against women, in all its complexity, without which no gender equality is possible; and tackling gendered divisions of labor as it relates to access and control over means of production and conditions of reproduction.

The most significant site of impact of LVC's gender politics was the movement itself. First, a relatively immediate result of the Bangalore decision, for instance, was a significant increase in women's presence, representation and voice within LVC. Notably, the two recent general coordinators of the movement have been women, first from Zimbabwe, and currently, a young peasant woman from France. Second, its gender politics have enabled and in some cases pushed member organizations to begin to address women's rights and gender issues at the national and/or regional levels. Importantly, gender politics have infused and radicalized LVC's conceptualization and practice of food sovereignty in specific ways. Another site of impact is the international arena in which La Via Campesina engages. For example, women's increased participation and their actions and positions as Via Campesina delegates in international gatherings have influenced debates to consider more carefully gender concerns (Monsalve 2006; Collins 2022; MacInnis et al. 2022). A glaring exception here is the weak integration of women's rights in the Via Campesina-negotiated UN Declaration of the Rights of Peasants and Others Working in Rural Areas (Martignoni and Claeys 2022).

Examining more closely the impact, or lack thereof, that women's demands, strategies and activism have had in different sites of struggle and within different levels of the movement and beyond forms an important part of the research gap that needs further attention. Two other critical areas requiring further research that would most certainly add nuance to LVC's political narrative include: gaining a better understanding of how women's autonomous spaces have worked over the long term, given the movement's diversity and complexity; and directly linked to this, are questions about the specific ways the movement practices a politics of intersectionality and how this affects its membership, dynamics, positions, strategies and mobilization. Finally, further research is needed on how recent debates on gender diversity (La Via Campesina 2016, 2017d, 2019) are expanding notions of gender equality within the movement beyond the binary man-woman and influencing its ways of organizing and feminist politics.

The concept of peasant and popular feminism remains undefined and yet to be collectively constructed within the movement and its organizations. It is not clear thus far what it means in specific locales, and whether or not and how the concept is or will be used throughout the movement. For example, what might be some of the commonalities, contradictions, tensions and clashes between peasant and popular feminism and existing feminist traditions in different rural areas? And, how will it be received in places that have no history of feminism? These are central questions for future research. If the internal

dialogue and debates on peasant and popular feminism succeed in capturing and reflecting on the movement's culturally diverse, multi-pronged and multi-sited engagement, and rich history, then it has much more potential to be the 'transformative, rebellious and autonomous' feminism that Via Campesina women declared at the Derio Women's Assembly (La Via Campesina 2017a). It also has more potential to resonate throughout the movement if 'reaching consensus on what the movement understands by "peasant and popular feminism"' (La Via Campesina 2017a) is arrived at through meaningful participation, true equality and solidarity among the regions and within the movement as a whole. There is no doubt that the movement will need to travel a long and winding road before it fully integrates its feminist discourse and praxis into its daily practices, policies, structures and ways of being while also ensuring that there is no backsliding. After all, just declaring you are feminist does not make it so, but it does signal a courageous commitment to which the movement is now accountable. Certainly, the determined, inventive, and collective work of Via Campesina women over decades sheds light on the inroads made thus far and the type of feminist politics being built from below.

LVC's gender equality approach embodies a feminist politics that interlinks capitalism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression within a social totality; that recognizes the interconnections between structures, material disadvantage, and sexism, and how these are engaged with, negotiated, and resisted in everyday life, individually and collectively; that acts to deconstruct and transform gender relations, confronting all forms of discrimination, violence, and the traditional patriarchal, heteronormative family farm model; and that specifically struggles to change systemic social structures of oppression. An examination of LVC's gender politics reveals that all of this is so much more than a 'nod' towards gender equality. This is a feminist politics with revolutionary potential for Via Campesina itself, food sovereignty and beyond; a politics well worth watching carefully, interrogating, understanding, analyzing and accompanying. It is also a feminist politics that pushes feminist agendas and debates to include rural and peasant women's concerns, ideas and struggles, and invites others to walk together with them in transforming society and building new gender relations free of domination and oppression.

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