

# The Vía Campesina Peasant Women on the

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*Cet article examine une petite mais significative partie du conflit mondial contre la mondialisation de l'agriculture en analysant la participation des femmes rurales impliquées dans le mouvement qui s'étend au-delà des nations : le « Vía Campesina ». Ici, la résistance aspire à de nouveaux concepts comme la souveraineté de la nourriture et la mise sur pied de mouvements sociaux plus inclusifs, démocratiques et équitables.*

This article explores rural women's resistance to the globalization of agriculture. This will be done by examining women's participation in the transnational peasant and farm movement, the Vía Campesina.<sup>1</sup> I begin by briefly discussing the meaning of "sustainability" in mainstream policy deliberations on agriculture, food and rural development. Next, I explore the Vía Campesina's concept of food sovereignty as an alternative to a neoliberal model of agriculture. This is followed by a discussion of peasant women's efforts to achieve gender equality within the Vía Campesina.

## From Local to Global of Agriculture

Concepts, however revolutionary, are often misinterpreted, misused and usurped by those in positions of power. For example, the concept of "sustainable agriculture," originally embraced a conscious move away from high-input agriculture to adoption of farming practices emphasizing a profound respect for ecology. Sustainable agriculture focused on local production for local consumption. It required environment-friendly practices such as, among others, integrated pest management, organic or low-input and small-scale agricultural production and polyculture. However, the term has now acquired new meaning.

Numerous international institutions like the World Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development, and the Global Forum for Agricultural Research have now integrated consideration for the envi-

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ronment under the banner of "sustainable agriculture." The contradiction, however, is that the "greening" of the rural development discourse has occurred within a whole-hearted embrace of a free-market development ideology. In agriculture, sustainability has been re-invisioned by national governments and many international institutions as successful integration into a global market place.

This prompted, on the heels of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) implemented throughout the 1980s, the signing of numerous bilateral and regional free trade agreements and the creation of the World Trade Organization in 1995. All emphasized increasing production for ex-

port, elimination of tariffs, opening borders, and increasing global trade in agriculture and food. In this light, "sustainability" in agriculture rests on the pillars of deregulation, privatization, industrialization, liberalization and globalization.

The globalization of this neoliberal model of agriculture was countered by the formation of a transnational peasant and farm movement, the Vía Campesina (Desmarais 2002, 2003a, 2003b). The Vía Campesina emerged in 1993 as the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was drawing to a close with the signing of—among 20 other agreements—the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Agreement on Agriculture and the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs). The transnational movement embraces organizations of peasants, small and medium scale farmers, rural women, farm workers and indigenous agrarian communities from the Americas, Asia Europe and Africa. Currently, 97 farm organizations representing millions of farming families from 43 countries now belong to the Vía Campesina.

Through the Vía Campesina progressive farm organizations vowed to collectively resist the globalization of agriculture and to ensure that the voices of those who produce the world's food would be heard and their interests addressed in future deliberations. Most importantly, for the Vía Campesina resistance includes developing viable alternatives.

# Frontiers of Food Sovereignty



*Peasant and farm women from over 23 countries throughout the Americas gathered together at the First Latin American Assembly of Rural Women held in Brasilia, Brazil, November 2-3, 1997. Photo: Douglas Mansur*

## **Food Sovereignty: An Alternative to Neoliberal Agriculture**

According to the *Vía Campesina* food is a basic human right and “all peoples” and states must have the right to define their own agricultural and food policies” to ensure domestic food security and the well-being of its farming population (*Vía Campesina* 2000c, 2000d). The *Vía Campesina* calls this food sovereignty. Food sovereignty, in the words of the *Vía Campesina* (1996a), means that peoples have the “right to produce our own food in our own territory” in ways that enhance the environment and peoples’ cultural values. Food sovereignty means ensuring that peasants, small farmers and rural women have the right to all resources necessary for producing food; they must have greater access to and control over land, seeds, water, credit and markets (*Vía Campesina* 2000c). Food sovereignty requires far reaching, genuine agrarian reform.

Moreover, food sovereignty is only possible with the democratic control of the food system and recognition that “cultural heritage and genetic resources belong to all humanity” (*Vía Campesina* 1996a: 22). This means that all life forms—including plant and animal—must be protected from patenting. It also means regulating markets through practices like supply management and orderly marketing.

Food sovereignty centers on the production of food and those who actually work the land. Hence, it goes beyond the common understanding of food security as guaranteeing that an adequate amount of food is produced and made accessible to everyone. Instead, food sovereignty deals head on with questions of what food is produced, where it is produced, how it is produced and at what scale. The *Vía Campesina* (1996b) argues that food security cannot be reached without food sovereignty.

Clearly, food sovereignty is a radical alternative to the

WTO's vision for agriculture. Whereas the WTO's guiding principles are the "right to export" at all costs and the "right to import" food as the best way to ensure food security, food sovereignty prioritizes local production for local consumption.<sup>2</sup> It is not that the *Vía Campesina* is opposed to agricultural trade. But, as the *Vía Campesina* stresses "food is first and foremost a source of nutrition and only secondarily an item of trade." Since food is a basic human right "only the excess should be traded." In addition, this international trade "must serve the interests of society" rather than filling the bottomless pockets of transnational agribusiness corporations. Food sovereignty is simply not possible under the WTO framework.

### Rural Women's Involvement in the *Vía Campesina*

It really was not until the Second International Conference of the *Vía Campesina*, held in Tlaxcala Mexico in 1996, that the *Vía Campesina* began to address gender issues in a concerted and systematic fashion.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps not that surprising given that all eight representatives who signed the Managua Declaration, the precursor to the *Vía Campesina*, and all regional coordinators elected at the First International Conference of the *Vía Campesina*, were men. Rural women's access to political and economic resources is greatly restricted and they continue to be excluded from decision-making positions. Agricultural policy making—both within farm organizations and beyond—remains largely male dominated.

The women who gathered together at the Tlaxcala Conference had struggled for years in their own communities and organizations to integrate gender issues in debates of agricultural policy. For most, this was an ongoing struggle waged at the local, national and regional levels. In Tlaxcala women delegates demanded no less at the international level and the *Vía Campesina* was driven to take direct actions in this area.

Following a long and heated debate the Tlaxcala Conference stipulated concrete steps towards gender equality. Essentially, the debate centered on what mechanism could best ensure women's increased participation and representation. Some argued for an affirmative action strategy whereby women would automatically have two seats on the International Coordinating Commission (ICC). Others claimed that women's effective participation at this level could only result from their leadership abilities and positions within their own countries and regions. Ultimately, the Tlaxcala Conference agreed to form a "special

committee" to work specifically on integrating women and gender issues in the *Vía Campesina* (1996b: 41). Furthermore, the Conference designated the only female member of the newly elected ICC—Nettie Wiebe, President of the National Farmers Union (NFU-Canada) and *Vía Campesina* Regional Coordinator for North America—to head the women's special committee.

For most women, the formation of a special committee to deal specifically with women was not seen as a goal in and of itself (*Vía Campesina Women's Working Group*). Many women farm leaders had had direct experience and were acutely aware of the numerous limitations with women's auxiliaries and/or women's secretariats in mixed organizations. Rarely did these structures guarantee equal status; often they were subordinate to, and played a secondary role within, male-dominated organizations. However, women considered this strategy as an important means, a process, that could integrate women—and their concerns, needs and interests—into the *Vía Campesina*, facilitate collective analysis and collective action among women (as women), and potentially challenge male domination in rural organizations and within the *Vía Campesina*

itself (*Vía Campesina Women's Working Group*). In essence, this special committee could give women an important space to organize themselves with the ultimate goal of eventually reaching gender equality within the *Vía Campesina*.

*Vía Campesina* women were quick to take advantage of the space they had won. Four months after the Tlaxcala Conference women's representatives from Europe, North America and Central America gathered in San Salvador for the first meeting of the *Vía Campesina Women's Working Group*, subsequently known as the *Vía Campesina Women's Commission*. The gathering covered a lot of ground and set the tone for future collaboration among women of the *Vía Campesina*. As women spoke from their own experiences of working within peasant and farm organizations a real sense of camaraderie, sharing of insights, and respect for one another permeated the discussions of potential models and plans for work within the *Vía Campesina*.

The women also enthusiastically contributed to further defining the *Vía Campesina's* position on food sovereignty that was to be presented at the World Food Summit (held in Rome in 1996). They studied the draft position in detail and stressed a number of additional issues. For example, women claimed that at the heart of food sovereignty was the notion that farming peoples "have the right to produce our own food in our own territory" (*Vía*

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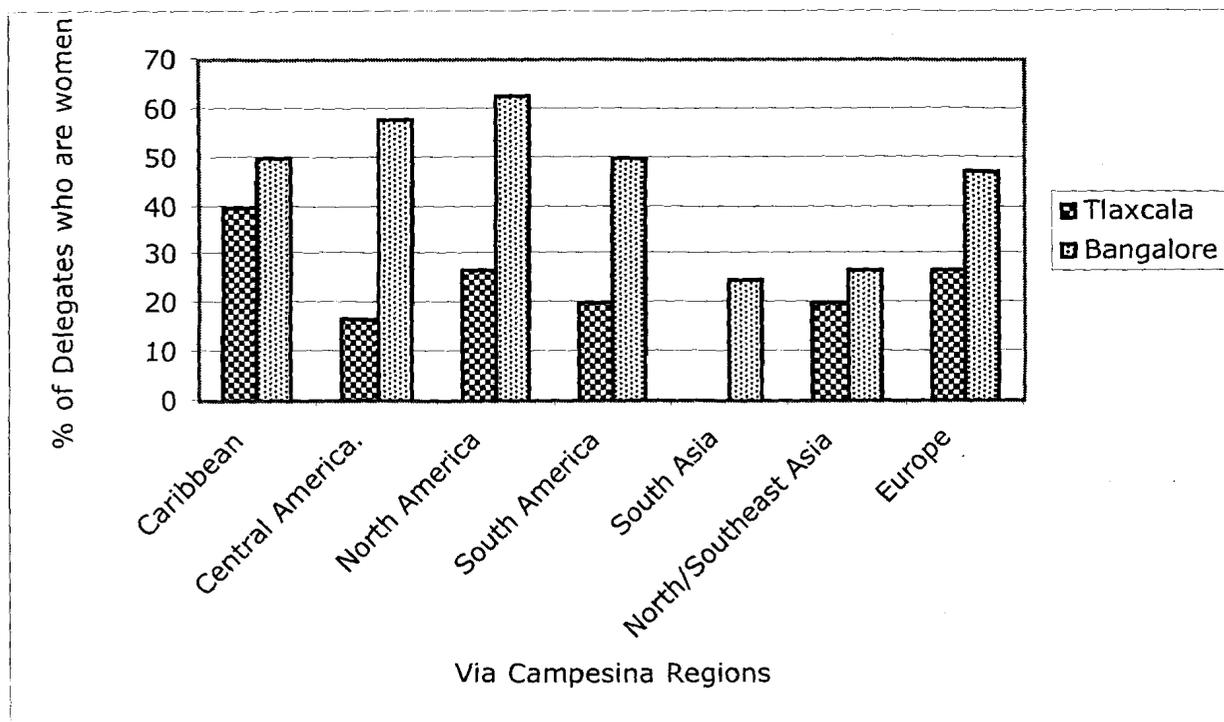


Figure 1. Comparison of Women's Participation in the Tlaxcala and Bangalore Conferences  
 Source: Lists of delegates attending the Tlaxcala and Bangalore conferences.

Campesina Women's Working Group 6). Although the draft position recognized the need for sustainable farming practices to ensure environmental sustainability women added a human health dimension. For women, as those primarily responsible for the well-being of their families, food sovereignty must also include a move to organic production or certainly drastic reduction in the use of health endangering chemical inputs and an immediate stop to the export of banned agro-chemicals. Finally, given the impact that agricultural policies were having on women's daily lives and their unequal access to productive resources (relative to men) women insisted that food sovereignty could only be achieved through women's greater participation in policy development in the countryside. All of these concerns eventually were integrated into the final position of the *Vía Campesina* on food sovereignty.

Organizing women's meetings immediately prior to international events and/or before *Vía Campesina* gatherings has contributed to greater participation and increased representation of women. For example, the *Vía Campesina* Women's Commission co-organized the Rural Women's Workshop on Food Security just prior to the World Food Summit in 1996; three years later the Women's Commission convened a meeting prior to the WTO events in Seattle. As a result, women constituted 34.5 per cent and 37.5 per cent of the *Vía Campesina* delegates to Rome and Seattle, respectively.

Latin American women used this same strategy when they convened the First Latin American Assembly of Rural Women just prior to the general Congress of the

Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (CLOC) held in Brasilia.<sup>4</sup> A total of 125 women participated in the Women's Assembly and subsequently they made up 37 per cent of the delegates at the CLOC Congress. Although the CLOC women did not reach their goal of gender parity the extent and level of participation of women was unprecedented in what had until then been largely a male-dominated space.

Of course, gender equality is not simply measured by numbers. The Latin American women's assembly prepared women leaders to contribute actively in policy development and advocacy plans throughout the CLOC Congress. Women enthusiastically joined the CLOC working group discussions on agrarian reform, sustainable agriculture, indigenous and Afro-American peoples, environment and natural resources, human rights, culture and education, rural workers, and organizational matters. Women were clearly visible as they joined men at the head table to give summary reports of the working group sessions and readily went to the microphones to voice opinions on various topics. Consequently, the Women's Assembly influenced the results of the CLOC Congress by adding gender to the analysis of class and ethnicity (Leon). Just as importantly, the CLOC Congress approved all of the resolutions and proposals of the Latin American Women's Assembly. Many of these were measures to help reach gender equality in both the CLOC and the *Vía Campesina*. By the Third Congress of the CLOC, celebrated in Mexico in August 2001, women surpassed their goal as they represented 56 per cent of Congress delegates.<sup>5</sup>

The *Vía Campesina* Women's Commission, with the approval and support of the ICC, went on to organize the First International Women's Assembly immediately preceding the Third International Conference of the *Vía Campesina* held in Bangalore India in early October 2000. Figure 1 clearly demonstrates how this strategy, once again, effectively led to a considerable increase (albeit with great regional variation) in women's participation.<sup>6</sup>

The First Women's International Assembly brought together peasant women from around the world and facilitated their engagement in discussions and decision-making on the future policy directions of the *Vía Campesina*. Not only did women deepen their understanding of the situation women faced in their own regions but they also learned about the struggles of counterparts from different continents. For some women, this was the first time they had crossed national borders and they were exposed to a whole new world. As one Indian participant claimed in her evaluation of the event: "I felt a closeness.... I no longer feel alone." In addition to discussing the various draft *Vía Campesina* positions—on food sovereignty and trade, gender, agrarian reform, human rights and solidarity, alternative agriculture, and biodiversity and genetic resources—women analyzed their achievements and the barriers they face in achieving gender equality in the countryside.

While the Third International Conference fell short of reaching the goal established by the Women's Commission and the ICC—that 50 per cent of the delegates be women—it did, however, take some important steps in that direction. During conference delegates unanimously agreed to a structural change to ensure gender parity. As mentioned before, from 1996 to 2000 the NFU's Nettie Wiebe was the only woman on the ICC. In Bangalore, the *Vía Campesina* decided to expand the ICC from eight to fourteen Regional Coordinators. Each region would now have two Regional Coordinators (one man and one woman) that were to be elected by the region and thus would be responsible for, and accountable to, the region. In addition, the women Regional Coordinators would meet prior to the ICC meetings and thus continue to function as the Women's Commission but now their work was broader since it included the general work of the *Vía Campesina*.

The Third International Conference also approved a Gender Position which clearly put women and gender issues at the heart of the *Vía Campesina*. The position articulated three main principles—equality and human rights, economic justice, and social development—each clearly specifying the particular role, position, needs and interests of women. A gender action plan stressed that the *Vía Campesina* perspective a gender perspective that also class and ethnicity. Furthermore, it called for organizing gender workshops for both men and women; ensuring gender equality on all *Vía Campesina* delegations, working groups and exchanges; integrating a gender perspective in all *Vía Campesina* positions; and fostering better

coordination and communication among all *Vía Campesina* organizations.

## Conclusion

The significance of the work done by the Women's Commission since its inception in 1996 cannot be underestimated. By the Third International Conference of the *Vía Campesina*, just four short years after the Women's Commission was created, women had gained considerable space in the *Vía Campesina*. Women were now more visible and actively participated in decision-making and *Vía Campesina* activities. Placing gender front and centre on the *Vía Campesina*'s agenda had forced the regions and their organizations to consider exactly how they would address and what actions were necessary to deal effectively with the gender question (Nicholson). The *Vía Campesina* leadership now makes greater efforts—with varying degrees of success and failure—to select women and men to represent the *Vía Campesina* in international fora. Certainly, a cursory reading of *Vía Campesina* documents demonstrates a shift from earlier days where women and gender were barely mentioned. The more recent positions of the *Vía Campesina* do reflect, to varying degrees, more of a gender analysis.

This is not to suggest that the work within the Women's Commission itself and the *Vía Campesina* as a whole was easy. However, given the space limitations I cannot elaborate on these issues here. Suffice it to say that there is much more work to do. As the First International Women's Assembly pointed out, while women had made considerable advances in creating more spaces, women's daily unequal access to and control over productive, political and social resources remain significant barriers to their equal participation and representation within the *Vía Campesina*. In many ways, the *Vía Campesina*'s success rests primarily on the persistent and concerted efforts of local and national organizations working towards gender equality.

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*This article is based on her doctoral research which analyzes the formation, consolidation and functioning of the *Vía Campesina*. The research was made possible with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, the International Development Research Center and the Department of Geography at the University of Calgary.*

<sup>1</sup>This title of this article is the name of a *Vía Campesina* project.

<sup>2</sup>See Einarsson for an analysis of how fundamental this "right to export" is to the WTO agreement on Agricul-

ture. Stevens et al. argue that for the WTO food security is perhaps best defined as having access to an “adequate supply of *imported* food” [my emphasis] (3).

<sup>3</sup>The following discussion is based on my own observations while attending the events described below and information compiled in various *Vía Campesina* documents.

<sup>4</sup>See CLOC and CLOC-*Vía Campesina* for the full proceedings of both events.

<sup>5</sup>According to final declarations of the CLOC events in Mexico, 180 women participated in the Second Latin American Assembly of Rural Women. Subsequently, a total of 320 delegates participated in the Third Congress of the CLOC.

<sup>6</sup>Figure 1 does not include the First Conference of the *Vía Campesina* held in Mons because there was no regional structure at that time. Women represented 20 per cent of the participants at the Mons Conference.

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## KAREN SHENFELD

### The Tent

I have no need  
of an elaborate design.  
I have only to walk away  
from the tent’s somber canopy,  
blood-prick of needles, thorns,  
from spring or well,  
its name, a tale of  
joy or woe.

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