

Impacts of neoliberal globalization policies on agrarian reform settlements and the resistance of the women of the MST to these policies

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For the Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra -- MST), the struggle for land is considered a struggle of the family, which includes men, women and children. The guidelines of the MST mention the necessity of constructing new gender relations within the movement. This perspective changes the life of the women involved in some respects.

Since the beginning the MST has made the struggle for agrarian reform the priority of its actions. This struggle demands, according to MST documents, the participation of all the landless workers. These documents stimulate mainly the participation of women at all levels. The feminine presence is visible mainly during land occupations, when frequently they are at the front line in armed confrontations with the "clandestine" and/or state militia.

The recognition of the necessity of female participation is the result of a complex and contradictory process that is still going on. On one hand, in the initial phase of its development the MST talked very little about gender questions. In its first publications, concern about the formation of the women is non-existent. The so-called "woman question" was either absent or was treated as an internal subject and, therefore, did not need to be publicized. In the 80's, when little was known about this movement, it a National Commission of the Women of the MST was organized that pressured the movement in order to have groups of women inside the encampments and settlements of each State and demanded that the leaders in these States support the women's organizations within the movement.

Several National Meetings led to the publication, in September 1989 of the first edition of the General Norms of the MST, where a chapter was included on the "articulation of the women".

We can identify different moments and spaces regarding the participation of women in this important movement of struggle for the land. The first one of them corresponds to the phase of the encampment, where new sociabilities have to be built, and the second one is the settlement, when men and women conquer the land.

In this work we intend to present succinctly the experiences of role inversions in the encampments of the MST and after that, deal with the reduction in women's participation in the settlements. Our objective is to give evidence that the policies implemented by the Brazilian State, submissive to globalization, have a catastrophic effect on agrarian reform settlements, mainly for women, as in this setting there predominates an erosion/reversal of the emancipation of rural women workers. Facing the obstacles imposed by the State, the women organized themselves within the MST and reacted. On the one hand, we will discuss the experience of struggle of women in Pontal do Paranapanema (State of São Paulo) and, on the other hand, the possibilities for change with the implementation of new models of settlement that allow an organization like the encampments, where there is greater equality between men and women. This model brings elements of resistance to neoliberal globalization, which allows the emancipation of workers and, mainly of women who work.

Gender deconstruction in the encampments

The encampments, result of the occupations, have become a generating element of settlements, as they pressure the Government to set up settlements in order to minimize rural conflict.[1](#)

The first days in the encampment are marked by a strange feeling; above all because the internal space configuration of the encampment is slightly different from the one they knew, though most of them have lived previously in very precarious conditions. Although there is no strict rule, almost always the families construct their shanty houses (*barracos*) using black plastic, next to families who are friends, acquaintances, etc. In accordance with the distribution of families, the "streets" are opened, the communitarian spaces built and Nuclei of Families are formed, which subdivide into sectors (discipline, education, formation, "mass front," gender, hygiene, infrastructure, health, culture, mystique) and elect representatives to form part of the *Political Coordination of the Encampment*. All of this constitutes an "organicidade política" or political body. Each Sector is coordinated today with by a man and a woman,² whose tasks are to identify and solve the difficulties found in the Nuclei of Families. All the members, independently of sex, race, and religion are involved in the activities of the encampment. It is in these first apprenticeships of collective life that men, women and children have the experience of allotting tasks. The experiences in the encampments are very important, as this is the moment when they start to live collectively, which implies establishing some rules to live together, materialized in the "internal regulation", which is determined in assembly and establishes the "codes" of behavior for each member of the encampment. Life in the encampment has other rules, other sociabilities, other apprenticeships that impose the creation of a collective experience where each one depends on all and all on each one. A code for living together is set up with proper rules and decisions are taken in assemblies. The encampment provides women with effective participation in activities that in general are defined as pertaining to public space and thus are considered male activities. It is the moment and place where women get closer to a status of equality with men. They participate in the construction of the *barracos*, tear the canvas, participate in the commissions, etc. In this process, the so-called private domestic space also gets new dimensions. The encampment itself confuses "private" and public space. Moreover, in this demarcated space the *barracos* have to be built very close to each other, generating a great discomfort because of the loss of privacy. Regarding the gender inequalities, the phase of the encampment offers a new apprenticeship: the same discomfort caused by the loss of privacy, is compensated by the impossibility of the well-known domestic violence of which women are the main victims. Several studies show that these women are seen as property of the family "male" and as such, they are easy objects of violence. In the encampment, in contrast, any type of violence against any member is expressly forbidden. Thus, the person (man or woman) who commits an act of violence will be punished and, in case it happens again, the person is expelled by the community. The phase of the encampment is also that of bigger participation of women: they participate in the meetings; they give their opinion and above all, experience political debate, an area from which they have always been excluded. Women accomplish tasks considered to be feminine, concerning health, education and infrastructure. For example, many coordinate the food, the Pastoral (a kind of association), the hygiene, the school, etc. However, beyond these tasks that we could call "typically" feminine, in the encampment we can observe the existence of gender role inversion, like the case of the security patrol that, supported by the attribute of the physical force, has always been considered a typically "masculine function". This inversion is result of ample debate provoked by the Gender Sector inside the MST. The encampments are the moments where true changes are made. Far beyond the transformations related to the class consciousness, deriving from the process of self recognition as "landless", life in the encampment ends up contributing to shape new gender relations, bringing about at the very least, a shuffling of the cards, that is, a rupture with the static condition of feminine inferiority that seemed "so natural".³

Reconstruction of the old sexual roles in the settlements

The settlements represent a positive result for the landless workers against the monopoly of landholders. It is the moment of organization of a new sociability, of a new process that implies creating conditions for staying on the conquered land. However, differently from the encampments,

which offer conditions for modifying gender inequalities, the settlement appears as a regression in time and space concerning the participation of women, who now say that "the husbands do not allow them to participate". This situation is very similar to that which Falquet has observed, concerning the sexual division of revolutionary work. The author, when analyzing the participation of women in the war in El Salvador, gives evidence that the social relations between the sexes remained invariant.⁴ A deeper look discloses that in the settlements many characteristic elements of the private sphere are retaken. In the space of the settlement patriarchal /fatherly relations predominate. The inequalities between men and women are re-established in an explicit way. While men go to the plantations, women are in the house taking care of domestic activities. They start to be dependent on their husbands or parents or friends. This is what, by the way, is shown in the contract of concession of the soil: the man appears as responsible for the lot whereas the woman is a "dependent", a situation that is not different from the ones identified in the rest of Latin America. The majority of the laws of agrarian reform seem to be neutral regarding gender, when it comes to beneficiaries to be defined in terms of certain social groups, like the permanent leaseholders and paid workers in the expropriated properties. However, without exception, agrarian reform legislation refers to these groups in the masculine form.

In the case of Brazil, the legislation on the agrarian reform in place until 1985, was based on the "Statute of the Land" of 1964, which gave priority to the heads of bigger families who wanted to dedicate themselves to agricultural activities. These criteria, according to Deere, "discriminated against women, that is according to cultural norms, if a man lives in the house, he will always be considered its head, a norm supported in the Civil Code of 1916".⁵

Through this contract, which lies on positive law, the property belongs to the man and denies women the possibility of administration and command. Other criteria, like the amount of experience in agricultural work, according to Deere, also discriminated against women, since the agricultural work done by them - either as an un-paid family worker, or as paid temporary workers - has always been invisible and devaluated. This makes it difficult for women to prove their experience in agriculture. The author observes that the "discrimination against woman was such that the employees of INCRA believed that women without husbands or friends were incapable of managing the soil, unless they had an older son, and it wasn't uncommon for women who lost their husbands and still had small children to lose their right to remain in the agrarian reform settlement. Moreover, when the oldest son of the widower was named beneficiary, the woman could lose the access to the land when her son got married and formed his own family".⁶

This exclusion of the woman is justified by the employees of INCRA by the lack of space in the registers to put the names of both man and woman. The Constitution of 1988 makes some changes in relation to the beneficiaries of agrarian reform. It established equal balance for the work of both men and women in the evaluation system used to select the beneficiaries. However, the data disclose another reality.

Feminine dependence anchored in the patriarchal neoliberal State

Neoliberal politics implemented by former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso contributed in great measure to this. The document "Family agriculture, agrarian reform, local development for a new rural world" reformulates all the projects of agrarian reform and presents a development politics based on the expansion of market-based agriculture. The "new rural world" starts to be the responsibility of the local sphere (municipal and micro-regional) with the support of federal investments, through the National Program of Family Agriculture (PRONAF), and of the new "partners" for the implementation and consolidation of settlements. On the back of this plan, the culture of agro business, of sugar cane and more recently of soybeans, were being consolidated. For the government, the agrarian question became a question for the market through the creation of the Banco da Terra (Land's Bank). The capitalist transformation of agriculture adopted by the Brazilian State prioritizes the technological and economic

aspects and the settlements acquire forms where time and space are determined by the dominant mode of production. Far beyond survival, it is necessary to produce to pay off the credits and loans gotten from the State, the bank, etc. We can emphasize that even in this land market, because men are the title holders, there is no accessibility for women. In addition, the system also blocks any access to government credit⁷ and/or negotiation with banks, etc. Between 1996 and 2002, only 7% of women were benefited by the National Program of Family Agriculture (PRONAF); in 2002, of the titles distributed by INCRA, 87% were for men; these men also represent 93% of those who got land through the Cédula da Terra program.⁸

The struggle to remain on the land seeks fast results and the economic aspect is imposed. Thus, the settlements can be understood as an expression of an impasse in the social struggle: on the one hand, it contains within itself the possibilities of overcoming the relations of exploitation of paid work, joining men and women on the land and working as a family, while also signaling the possibility of the democratization of the agrarian structure. But on the other hand, "the settlements, mainly in the 90's, could not materialize their full potential".⁹ In many places, there is a strong conflict between agents of agro business and the settled workers. Several are the cases in which the settled workers are obliged to negotiate parcels of their land for the planting of sugar cane or soybean in order to survive. This impossibility is the result of the difficulties in conquering a policy of Agrarian Reform. Despite these limits, some studies¹⁰ demonstrate that there were positive modifications in the life of the settled families regarding nutrition, health care and housing.

Provisional Decree 2109-52, implanted by Fernando Henrique Cardoso on May 24 th 2001 , expressly forbade the participation of settled workers in agrarian conflicts, making the aforementioned difficulties stronger. The adoption of this provisional decree led to the criminalization of the struggle for land. By demanding that those who had conquered the ownership of the land not get involved in agrarian conflicts anymore, this decree also became one of the main measures responsible for the demobilization of these workers, with regard to the support they have given to the ones who are still encamped. The immediate result was a restriction of women to domestic activities, while the husbands would go to the plantations.

Women marching against the patriarchal neoliberal State

Since the beginning of the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso there were conflicts around the question of the struggle for land. As the landless workers organized themselves, the conflicts increased. The region of Pontal do Paranapanema disclosed itself as one of the major regions for land conflicts in the 90's. One of the aspects of this conflict is the increase in the number of land occupations, mainly beginning in the second half of the 90's. The constant conflicts around the question of the ownership of the land in Pontal, led some authors to attribute the emergence of the MST to the "discovery of Pontal" which brought the Movement close to the political elites of the richest State of the federation.¹¹ The presence of the MST in the region brought back another political actor, which had remained discrete until then: the Rural Democratic Union (União Democrática Ruralista). Both actors, following the example of what was occurring in the rest of Brazil , ended up politicizing the struggle for land. First of all, this was because "some agencies of the State apparatus - executive, legislative and judiciary - could not ignore the existence of an agrarian question anymore, which generates conflicts and violence in the countryside". Moreover, on the one hand "the landholders, and on the other hand, the landless workers, presented themselves on the political scene as true social forces"¹² something that was reflected directly in the form of conflict between land grabbers, the State and the Movement.

In this situation, the women of the MST did something that called into question the neoliberal politics of the region. The first exclusive experience of the women was a land occupation. The second was a women's march that ended with the occupation of an agency of the Bank of Brazil (Banco do Brasil), in 1997. Both the experiences brought out a series of activities that led to the questioning of the proper

sexual composition of the structure of the Movement in the region.

Several militants who we interviewed observe that the year 1996 was crucial for the change in the way women started to act in the struggle for land in Pontal. The most frequently cited episode is the occupation of Fazenda São Domingos (a farm), which resulted in other actions by women. This occupation occurred in a period of intense criminalization of those involved in the struggle for land: *"The majority of the people who were in the leadership at that time were fugitives, right? And then the women decided they would do a land occupation to show that if the men were arrested, then the women would have to be arrested as well because the "boys" were not alone in making the Movement, right? The women were there as well, right?"* (R. settled worker and militant.).

As a settled worker/militant remembers, *"women went on politicizing themselves in the process of struggling and got to be more enthusiastic"*. After this occupation they went on three marches composed only of women, occupying Banks and Courts with the objective of stimulating the release of credits from the National Program for Family Agriculture (PRONAF) for the areas that had been recently transformed into settlements. Far beyond this immediate objective, this process became a symbol of the struggle on International Women's Day and stimulated the internal debate of the Movement, both in its organizational structures and in its areas of action, more specifically in the encampments, with the participation of women in several sectors, as already mentioned, but also in the new way of thinking about the settlement, as we will see below.

"New" models: perspectives of changes¹³

Beyond the already mentioned obstacles to women's participation in the settlements, it is necessary to consider that the state's modes of land distribution move people away from the collective life. In the rectangular model or, in the language of the settled workers the "dumb square", houses are kilometers away from each other making it difficult to have a collective life. Transport difficulties are also big, mainly affecting the daily travel of children to school. Additionally, since in this model the lot is a kind of private property it imposes a sexual division of labor that is slightly different from the encampment.

In the fight against this inequality, several rural social movements have pushed for arrangements that make both the man and the woman responsible for the lot, eliminating the existence of a "responsible" and a "dependent". We will discuss the case of the MS, which alongside the struggles relating to responsibility for the lot proposed a new settlement model, which is an aspect we consider fundamental for the alteration of gender inequalities. The new models are a proposal by the MST to organized settlements in a way that differs the well known "dumb square". This new design can contribute toward the construction of new habits which, in turn, lead to changes in gender relations. What's new about this model?

First, it encourages participation during the elaboration and execution of the division of the settlement area. Some experiences in the States of Espírito Santo and Mato Grosso, and more recently, in the State of São Paulo, show that this is a realistic and more flexible form of organizing housing and cooperation. Nonetheless, it supposes a previous phase of encampment, where families were grouped according to friendship or kinship and were assigned spots in the future settlement based on that organization. Until now INCRA has assigned lots of land by random drawing to individual families, which kept them apart and prevented any form of a collective life. This drawing by groups represents for the MST the first step and the potential for future forms of cooperation among families, either for the social aspects, or the economic ones.

This new model of settlement has as its central point, the organization of housing through *Housing Nuclei* with a number of families that can vary from 10 to 25, depending on the size of the area of the settlement. Differently from agro villages (*Agrovilas*) where the lot is distant from the house, in the *Housing Nuclei* (Núcleos de Moradia) the houses are on the lots. This new type is also different from

the traditional distribution where each house is distant from one another lost in the middle of the lot. This model has the format of a "sun ray", with neighboring houses forming a circle and the lots beginning in the yard extending outwards. Another type of housing is the "*Núcleos Habitacionais*," where the house is not located within the lot, but as the number of families is small, the distance between lot and house diminishes.

No matter the option, *núcleos habitacionais* or housing nuclei, there is an approximation of the families, which allows the implantation of social areas where reserved spaces for schools, religious celebration, sports, etc. are installed, creating a collective life quite similar to that of the encampment, mainly because this form of organization implies the creation of an Internal regulation with codes for living together to avoid problems, frequently present in the *Agrovilas*, as in the case of stray farm animals.

The distribution of the families by Nuclei helps to save a bit in the installation and maintenance of the infrastructure. For example, expenses related to the installation of the electricity lines and sewers are diminished and school buses and garbage trucks have a somewhat shorter route.¹⁴ These family nuclei form the organization of the base nuclei of the settlement with the coordination of two people, a man and a woman. Thus, the patriarchal trend of only having men in the settlement coordination is avoided.

This new model has direct implications for the collective organization of production, as opposed to agro business, it prioritizes agro-ecology, the exchange of grains and seeds for plantation, the political control of credits, the formation and new forms of cooperation like the CPAs (Cooperatives of Farming Production), the CPS's (Service Cooperatives) as a way of giving support to the production of the settled workers.¹⁵ The Brazilian Constitution guarantees the ownership of the land title for the settled worker. The proposal of the MST, in contrast, is to break with this mechanism that privileges the lot as private property. It is the use and enjoyment of the land, and not the private ownership, that allows one to produce and to live on the land. The land is no longer the object of purchase and sale. Concerning the gender relations, it is proposed that the usufruct title be issued on behalf of both the woman and the man. For INCRA, until recently (2003), the lot title would have to be issued to on behalf of the person who was already registered, making the patriarchal relations stronger, as we mentioned. The issuing of title to both the woman and the man makes it possible for women to prove their profession (farmer) and so in the future they can guarantee their retirement pension. Also it puts the woman in the same position as the man, and they are able to discuss among them, the destination of the funds/credits, the planning of the lot and the production.

Another basic change which is directly related to gender relations is the reduction of the territorial division of the work as a result of gender. In capitalism, separation of the house from the place of production imposed a sexual division of work, in which as we observed, woman is circumscribed to the sphere of reproduction and man to the sphere of production. In this new model there is a fusion between these two spheres: the work place (the lot) starts in the yard of the house. The return of the Regiment with living rules and the proximity of the houses again inhibit the domestic violence so diffused in the society as a whole.

Therefore, the new spatial organization of the settlements allows significant changes in gender relations. However, these changes, according to leaders of the Gender Sector, will only occur effectively if there is a constant work that combines social struggles and emancipation of women. The hierarchy of priority treatment for the so-called general questions, in detriment of "the specific" questions must be abolished. This territorial reformulation can open space for "a revolution inside the revolution".

The Gender Sector in such a way plays a basic role in this process of mutation, either organizing the space or changing the gender relations. In the simultaneous spatial and social changes are inserted the political lines of this Sector, amongst which I can highlight the following ones: to guarantee that the

registration and the granting of the document of concession of use of the land is done on behalf of both man and woman; to assure that the resources, planning, execution and control of the projects as well as production are discussed by the whole family. Moreover, the Sector has the objective of stimulating the effective participation of the women through educational activities regarding the topics of gender and social class in all the political bodies, either of the movement as a whole, or the encampment or the settlement.

he laborious domestic tasks, which represent one of the concerns of the Gender Sector, can be substituted in this new model by cafeterias, communitarian laundries, etc., calling into question the bourgeois family model that imposes the domestic tasks on the individual families who, dominated by the patriarch, compel the women to accomplish.

NOTES

1 Regarding this, see FERNANDES, Mançano Bernardo. *A formação do MST no Brasil*. São Paulo , Vozes, 2000.

2 The coordination of a man and a woman is not called a "quota". It is about an attempt to bring about a bigger involvement of the women in all the spheres of the Movement. This is one of the new features conquered by the just formed Gender Sector. See CAMPOS, Cristiani. *Construindo novas relações de gênero: desafiando relações de poder* . São Paulo , ANCA, 2003.

3 A more detailed analysis of the participation of women in the encampments of the MST can be found, amongst others, in HONÓRIO, Renata Gonçalves. "Acampamentos: novas relações de gênero (con)fundidas na luta pela terra do Pontal do Paranapanema". *Lutas Sociais*, nº 13, São Paulo, NEILS, 2005, at the press.

4 FALQUET, Jules. "Division sexuelle du travail révolutionnaire : réflexions à partir de l'expérience salvadorienne (1970-1994)". *Cahiers des Amériques Latines* , n. 40, Paris, IHEAL, 2003.

5 DEERE, Carmen. "Os direitos da mulher a terra e os movimentos sociais rurais na reforma agrária brasileira". *Revista de Estudos Feministas*, vol. 12, n. 1, Florianópolis, UFSC, p. 184.

6 Idem, ibiden.

7 In December 8 th 2004 , the Minister for the Promotion of Women launched on national television her policies for the promotion of gender equality. One of the key measures is the introduction of PRONAF-Woman which will directly benefit the women in the access to the credit.

8 See Butto, Andréa *apud* Paulilo, Ignês Maria. "Trabalho familiar: uma categoria de análise esquecida ". *Revista de Estudos Feministas* s , vol. 12, n. 1, Florianópolis, UFSC, 2004.

9 GRECO MARTINS, Adalberto. *Potencialidades transformadoras dos movimentos camponeses no Brasil contemporâneo: as comunidades de resistência e superação no MST*. São Paulo, PUC, 2004, p. 165.

10 Results of researches by BERGAMASCO, Sônia "Reforma agrária e assentamentos em São Paulo: mudanças no espaço rural". *Jornal da Unicamp*. 22 a 28 de setembro, 2003; e LEITE, S. & MEDEIROS, Leonilde *et alii*. *Impactos dos assentamentos: um estudo sobre o meio rural brasileiro*. São Paulo, Unesp, 2004.

11 NAVARRO, Zander. "Sete teses equivocadas sobre as lutas sociais no campo, o MST e a reforma agrária". In: STÉDILE, João Pedro. (org.). *A reforma agrária e a luta do MST*. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1997, p.120.

[12](#) COLETTI, Claudinei. “Ascensão e refluxo do MST e da luta pela terra na década neoliberal”. *Idéias*, ano 9, n° 1, Campinas, IFCH, 2002, p. 58. 9, n. 1, Campinas, IFCH, 2002, p. 58.

[13](#) We support ourselves here on the *Caderno de Cooperação Agrícola*, n° 10, published by MST & CONCRAB, in 2001.

[14](#) In a settlement created recently in Pontal the model "sun ray" has been adopted. The school bus that, in the traditional model, would have to cover a path of 26 km to pick up all the children, now covers only the 4 km of the streets in front of the houses of the housing nuclei (*Núcleos de Moradia*).

[15](#) On the cooperation forms, see PAGOTTO, Claudete. “Cooperação e cooperativas: instrumentos de organização e de resistência dos trabalhadores sem-terra”. *Lutas Sociais*, n° 11/12, São Paulo, NEILS, 2004