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Women/Ecology

Women of Corn

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In the countries of the Global South, women are the principal producers of food, those in charge of working the land, safeguarding the seeds, gathering the fruit, obtaining water. Between 60 to 80% of food production in these countries is down to women, and worldwide at a level of 50%. These women are the main producers of the staple crops, such as rice, wheat and maize, which go to feed the most impoverished populations of the South. But despite their key role in agriculture and provision of food, they are, together with children, the most affected by hunger.

For centuries, rural women have been responsible for domestic chores, care of people, feeding of families, and cultivation and marketing of surplus from their gardens, and have borne this load of reproductive, productive and community work in a private and invisible domain. In contrast, the principal economic transactions of agriculture, the trading of livestock and bulk buying and selling of cereals in the market, have been carried out by men... occupying the public rural domain.

This division of roles assigns to women the upkeep of home, of health, of education and of families and gives men the management of land and machinery and most significantly the "know-how", thus perpetuating the roles allotted as masculine and feminine which for centuries and even today persist in our societies.

Nonetheless, in many regions of the Global South, in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia, there exists an evident "feminisation" of paid agricultural work. Between 1994 and 2000, women occupied 83% of new employment created in the sector of non-traditional agricultural export. But this tendency includes a marked division of gender; on the plantations, women perform the unskilled tasks such as collection and packaging, while men carry out the harvesting and planting.

This incorporation of women into the paid workplace entails a double burden for women, who continue to carry out the care of their families whilst working to obtain an income from an employment which for the most part is precarious. They can expect worse working conditions than their male counterparts and lower pay for the same tasks, therefore having to work longer to earn the same.

Another difficulty is access to land. In several countries of the South, laws deny women this right, and in those that legally concede tenure, tradition and custom impede disposition to them. However, this problem not only occurs in the Global South. In Europe, many women farmers do not have their entitlements recognised and despite working on the land like their male peers, farm ownership and payment of social security, etc is usually commanded by men. Consequently, women, on retirement, cannot count on any pension, nor have claim to assistance or to payments, etc

The degradation of farmland in these Southern countries and the increase in migration to the cities has provoked a process of agricultural disintegration. Women are an essential component of this national and international migration, engendering a disruption and abandonment of families, land, and processes of production whilst increasing the family and community burden of the women who remain. In Europe, the United States, Canada... migrant women end up taking the jobs that years back were filled by locals, reproducing a cycle of oppression, burden and "invisibilisation" of care, whilst externalising its social and economic costs to the communities of origin of the migrant women.

The incapacity to resolve the current crisis of caretaking in western countries, the combined result of massive incorporation of women into the labour market, the aging of the population, and the non-existent response from the state to these needs, leads to the massive importation of female labour into domestic work and paid care, from the

countries of the Global South.

In opposition to this intensive and unsustainable neoliberal agricultural model which has demonstrated a complete inability to satisfy dietary needs of people and a complete disrespect for Nature, and which is especially adverse to women, arises the alternative paradigm of food sovereignty. This deals with the recuperation of our right to determine the what, the how and the source of what we eat; that the land, the water and the seeds are in the hands of small farmers (male and female); and the fight against the monopoly of agrifoods.

And it is requisite that this food sovereignty is profoundly feminist and internationalist, and that its accomplishment will only be possible from full equality between men and women and free access to the means of food production, distribution and consumption, along with solidarity among peoples, far from the chauvinistic cries of “ours first.”

We must reclaim the role of women farmers in food and agricultural production, and recognise the part played by the “women of corn”, those that work the land. To make visible the invisible. And to promote alliances between rural and urban women, from the North and the South. To globalise a resistance... feminine.