

# Food sovereignty and popular feminism in Brazil

*Souveraineté alimentaire et féminisme populaire au Brésil*

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## Introduction

- 1 The relationship between gender and food is, according to the literature, matters of hierarchies and inequalities (Mauriello and Cottino, call for papers/introduction to the special issue-INFRA). Gender inequalities can be found in access to food production resources, working conditions in the food sector, the division of domestic work in food preparation, and food consumption (Beardsworth *et al.* 1996). Food insecurity and hunger systematically affect girls and women (Patel 2012). Allen and Sachs (2007) have observed that women are very active in mobilizations for alternative food systems, engaging with the state, the market, and local food initiatives. Nonetheless, the authors note “a curious absence of feminism per se in women’s efforts to create change in the agrifood system, with the exception of corporeal politics” (Allen *et al.* 2007: 13-14), referring to the politics of the body, for instance, debates about body shape. Women, the authors argue, do not always consciously challenge gender inequalities but often reinscribe them in social movements (for instance, by assuming more invisible tasks and not leadership positions); therefore, women within food movements do not mobilize as well for their empowerment. Some engagements in food movements even run counter to a feminist agenda or increase women’s workload, among other repercussions.
- 2 However, a growing alliance between feminist and food sovereignty movements challenges this apparent absence of feminist engagement in the transformation of agrifood systems. A feminist food agenda can be identified in many agrarian movements in Latin America and, at the transnational level in the World March of Women, a popular feminist movement that has actively pursued a politics of alliance with non-feminist others (Conway 2018; Masson *et al.* 2017; Nobre 2011). Such a strategy

has brought food issues to their agenda and contributed to an anti-patriarchal critique within food sovereignty movements. Scholars have traced some of the roots of this transnational cross-fertilization to the trajectories of women's organization within agrarian movements in Brazil (Conway 2018; Masson *et al.* 2017; Nobre 2011). According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), rural women are responsible for 45% of food production in Brazil.<sup>1</sup> However, households headed by women are more affected by food insecurity than ones headed by men; food insecurity in rural areas is higher than in urban areas (Galindo *et al.* 2021);<sup>2</sup> and the rates of violence against women are very high in Brazil, where patriarchal culture runs deep. As a result, women's struggle against inequalities in the food system in Brazil have been fought within these patriarchal structures, hand in hand with the demands for gender equality on the part of social movements — and, indeed society as a whole. Indeed, in Brazil, women's organizing within agrarian movements has achieved some important policy changes such as joint land titles for couples and labor rights for women, including pension rights and maternity leave. Women have not only fought against gender inequalities in the food system; they have also fought for women's empowerment within social movements, clearly informed by feminist ideas.

- 3 These working-class women's movements have not always self-identified as feminist, or been recognized as such, as their membership and agendas differ from what is considered historical feminism in the region. The emergence of feminist movements in Brazil has been traced to white middle-class activists, many coming from political exile in Europe and concentrated on issues like sexual and reproductive rights, and deeply engaged with the political left in struggles for democratization in the region. They have strongly contributed to consolidating democracy and strengthening civil society and party organizations, with increased professionalization and access to political spaces (Alvarez 1990). Working-class women's mobilizations for communal survival against neoliberal economic reforms and dictatorships in the 1980s and 1990s have been conceptualized as popular feminism (Schild 1994). These articulated a class-conscious agenda of socioeconomic demands for the working class, as well as gendered-classed demands and those against the subordination of women. While alliances with historical feminism have given women's movements more emancipatory possibilities, popular feminism helps build new agendas and diversifies feminist struggles (Conway *et al.* 2021).
- 4 In the first decades of this century, while Brazilian mainstream and historical feminism occupied spaces of participative democracy, constituting what scholars called "state feminism" (Matos *et al.* 2018), new expressions of popular feminism flourished. Within rural unions under the organization of the *Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras na Agricultura* (National Confederation of Agricultural Workers, CONTAG), rules on gender parity began to be implemented in the 1990s (Aguiar 2015; Pimenta 2019). Other movements like *La Via Campesina*, the *Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores* (Small Farmers Movement, MPA) and the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers' Movement, MST) have since incorporated gender equality to their political agenda. In 2003, the MPA organized the First National Conference on Gender Relations, Power and Class (Carvalho 2020) and later published a book on peasant women in collaboration with scholars (Neves *et al.* 2013). In 2000, the MST formed a gender committee; in 2005, it approved parity rules for its national offices, and in 2018, it created an LGBT working group. In March 2020, the MST organized the First National Meeting of Landless Women. The Movement of Peasant Women, part of *La Via*

Campeſina, emerged in 2004 as an autonomous movement, that is, as an alternative to advancing gender equality agendas within mixed gender movements. Since March 2006, when women activists from *La Via Campeſina* uprooted genetically modified eucalyptus trees in a protest coinciding with international negotiations of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention of Biodiversity, important protests have taken place on International Women’s Day across Brazil (Menegat *et al.* 2019; Siliprandi 2015). Thus, an important date on the feminist calendar is now linked with demands for transformation in the food system. Feminism is also a mobilizing force within the *Articulaão Nacional de Agroecologia* (National Network of Agroecology, ANA), founded in 2002, which groups rural and urban movements and supports alternative food initiatives. Within ANA, the slogan “without feminism there is no agroecology” gained strength to underscore the transitions to ecological farming that agroecology entails, but also the associated social shift in gender relations.

- 5 Perhaps the most sustained and broadest collective action in joint feminist and food sovereignty struggles in Brazil has been the *Marcha das Margaridas*,<sup>3</sup> a national protest march that has brought between 20,000 and 100,000 women to Brasilia six times since 2000. The roots of the *Marcha* have to be understood in the context of the political organization of women rural workers inside the broader union movement between the 1970s and 1990s (Aguiar 2015; Pimenta 2019). The *Marcha* emerged as a show of strength among women rural workers, both externally (to society and the state) and internally (to the trade union movement of rural workers). In order to be seen as a powerful force, the women leaders from the union movement knew that they needed collaborations and partnerships with other movements. Feminist organizations — in particular, the NGO *Sempreviva Organizaão Feminista* (SOF) — were extremely important to building alliances between the *Marcha das Margaridas* and the transnational World March of Women.<sup>4</sup> Thus, since its first edition, a politics of alliance is a constitutive feature of the *Marcha* (Motta *et al.* 2021; Teixeira *et al.* 2020).
- 6 We approach the *Marcha das Margaridas* not as a unified political subject or as specific group of women, but as a coalitional identity (Motta 2021). In our view, its main strength lies in the myriad, diversely situated perspectives among rural working women in Brazil, and transforming its agenda to include them (Aguiar 2015). The foundational political category “rural working women” evolved into “women from the field and the forest” in 2011, and then again to “women from the field, the forest, and the waters” in 2015. The expansion of the category hints at an underlying process of negotiating identities that correspond to diverse social realities across Brazil, including family farmers, fisherwomen from different regions, forest dwellers in the Amazon region, *quilombolas*, and indigenous women.
- 7 In this article, we analyze the contribution of the *Marcha das Margaridas* to a feminist food sovereignty agenda. How did food sovereignty make its way onto the agenda? What does food sovereignty mean in the context of their mobilization? How can food sovereignty be understood from the situated perspective of rural and popular feminism? The meaning of food sovereignty within the political agenda cannot be understood without taking into account the historical evolution of their demands; therefore, the first part of this article describes how the topic of food emerged prior to the concept of food sovereignty. In the second section, we search for the ways in which the topic of food sovereignty resonates with the unionist and feminist political agenda of the *Marcha* in order to avoid the assumption that food sovereignty is a foreign

concept to the *Marcha* members, one imported a-critically to their mobilization. Therefore, here we identify five main themes in the discourse of the *Marcha das Margaridas* on food sovereignty: 1) food as a right and a commons; 2) state support for women's food production; 3) the value of uncommodified food work; 4) environmental recovery through agroecology; 5) violence-free food, produced through respectful social relations. We conclude that by elaborating on a critique of gender inequalities inherent to food at various scales and dimensions, while simultaneously advocating for their own agenda to overcome such inequalities, the *Marcha das Margaridas* builds a feminist food sovereignty agenda that is popular and rural.

- 8 In terms of data and methods, we draw on different types of data that are part of a broader research project. We combine documental analysis of archival material produced by the *Marcha*, ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with activists that represent different social movements and NGOs in the coalition. Regarding archival sources, a myriad of documents are typically produced during their process of mobilization, which can be classified in two phases. A document for discussion (*Caderno de Texto* and *Texto-base*) is written by the national organizing committee and distributed among all organizations in a number of activities in preparation for the march, which is itself understood as a permanent process of mobilization and political formation. This process involves around one million rural women according to the organizers. After discussions at the local, regional and national levels, the rapporteurs develop a text with demands. This article is mainly based on a qualitative analysis of documents, in particular the texts *Caderno de Textos* and *Texto-base*, which are both used by the group as part of political training and preparation for the march and other types of mobilizations.
- 9 The analysis is dynamic, not systemic, allowing for a strong cross-fertilization between theory and empirical material, and open to further development. This is aligned with an epistemological position that acknowledges the processes of knowledge production and political negotiation associated with the texts used for the analysis. Although we rely mostly on archival data, our analysis draws on a broad body of knowledge that we have been accumulating for some years. Two months of fieldwork preceded the fifth march (Marco Antonio Teixeira) and sixth march (both authors). Additionally, we conducted twenty-one formal interviews in Brasilia, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte with leaders of organizations and movements that are part of the coalition. Field observations were also done at other events of the *Marcha das Margaridas* and the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers we were invited to attend over the past four years.
- 10 Last but not least, we understand that the process of building knowledge involves learning from the knowledge produced by activists themselves, in a process of exchange. However, we situate ourselves in the academic field and not in the militant field, and take responsibility for our writing. We are committed to a feminist epistemology of science, which challenges the idea that science is neutral, and rather invites scholars to disclose their social location and positionality vis-à-vis their research object. Our positionality is that of a cis-female and a cis-male (non-subaltern) migrants scholars situated geopolitically in Northern Europe and doing research predominantly, but not exclusively, in Latin America. We position ourselves in solidarity with the struggle of the *Marcha das Margaridas* and many other progressive social movements that have been struggling for socioenvironmental justice.

## Food sovereignty on the political agenda of *Marcha das Margaridas*

- 11 Tracing the discussion of food in the documents used for the political training and mobilization activities for the *Marcha*, we have classified four different periods in the evolution of the topic, when: 1) hunger and food insecurity dominated the agenda, 2) the concept of “food sovereignty” is incorporated, 3) food sovereignty comes to the forefront among other issues dear to the *Marcha*, and 4) food sovereignty becomes more deeply articulated with the idea of people’s self-determination.
- 12 During the first phase (*Marcha* 2000 and 2003), the slogans used by the *Marcha* prominently include the struggle against hunger and food insecurity. The documents identify global capitalist dynamics and state development policies, which disproportionately affects rural workers as a class (CONTAG 2000: para. 15), as the roots of hunger. The issue was particularly relevant at the beginning of the century: in 2004, 34.9% of Brazilian households suffered from food insecurity according to the Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale, which was introduced that same year (IBGE 2020). In terms of severe food insecurity, which means going hungry, 6.9% of Brazilians were affected. The question of addressing hunger, then, was one of the core socioeconomic and political topics at that time. After figuring prominently in public debate for years, the need to address hunger became a priority for Lula da Silva, who was elected president for the first time in 2002.
- 13 At the dawn of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the documents of the *Margaridas* presented the Alternative Project for Sustainable Rural Development, the CONTAG’s political project, paying special attention to the needs and rights of rural working women. The project defends family farming as alternative model that generates income, employment, food, environmental protection, and socioeconomic growth (CONTAG 2000). The dominant agrarian model, it is argued, disproportionally affects women and conversely, demand: women’s access to land, credit, and documentation (as many women do not have the legal documentation required to access the benefits of public policies). The *Margaridas* demand recognition of the value of women’s farm work and labor rights as working women. In short, their anti-capitalist stance intersects with an anti-patriarchal stance.
- 14 The introduction of the concept of food sovereignty in 2007 marks the commencement of the second phase. Here the emphasis was on “the autonomy and the right of the peoples and countries to defend their food culture and to establish development policies that protect and ensure food production, distribution, and consumption” (CONTAG 2007) and is presented together with the concept of food security and nutrition. New concepts are incorporated in a didactic manner, with explanations as to the associated meanings, history, and institutions in Brazil. The text states: “Food and nutritional security is a topic that demands understanding, debate, involvement, and organized action on the part of rural working women” (CONTAG 2007). The *Margaridas* must explicitly engage with food and nutritional security, and participate in building food sovereignty (CONTAG 2007), highlighting the importance of women on this agenda. However, the text notes that this is not a completely new issue for the *Margaridas*, as their daily lives “are directly associated with food and nutritional security, which, for its part, is related to the slogan of the *Marcha das Margaridas*: “2007

reasons to march against poverty, hunger, and sexist violence” (CONTAG 2007), the same one used in the previous mobilizations.

- 15 The third phase in the trajectory of food sovereignty in the *Marcha* documents is 2011-2015. During this period, the concept grows more central and displaces previous references to food and nutritional security. In 2011, food sovereignty becomes a mobilizing topic in and of itself, as it is “part of the daily life and essential to life, with strategic importance for overcoming hunger and poverty and accomplishing sustainable development” (CONTAG 2011). The *Marcha*’s documents use the definition of food sovereignty laid out in the Nyélény Declaration of 2007.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, many other social movements, like the ones that are part of the *La Via Campesina*, co-participated in elaborating this concept. The *Margaridas* call for alliances between urban and rural movements, as “the strengthening of family farming is not a struggle limited to people from the countryside and forests (and their organizations): it must be recognized as strategic to guaranteeing healthy food for the urban population” (CONTAG 2011).
- 16 In 2015, “food sovereignty” substitutes the full expression that previously included “food and nutritional security.” The text from this year provides insight into disputes over the term “food security,” which has different meanings according to the political subjects who bring the concept to the table and their interests, but which is still relevant in the Brazilian context. Food sovereignty, by contrast, is counter-hegemonic, as it serves to “question the pillars of the current hegemonic food system based on increasing land concentration, the expansion of monocropping and mining over diverse biomes, and a dependence on transnationals that control everything from production to retail” (CONTAG 2015: 17). The socio-environmental impacts of this system are poverty, food insecurity, worker exploitation, and the expropriation of land and water resources. Through this model, people from the field, the forest, and the waters are prevented from producing healthy and diverse food. It is a model that relies on “the exploitation and subordination of women’s work, devaluing and erasing their leading role in food production and in assuring food sovereignty” (CONTAG 2015: 18).
- 17 According to the same text, food and nutritional sovereignty converges with the struggles of agrarian social movements and women’s movements on issues such as land reform, territorial rights, access to clean water for consumption and production, and a sustainable, solidary, and fair production and consumption model based on agroecology and family farming. It is also related to public policies to strengthen this model, local markets and public procurement to ensure supply, access to adequate and healthy food free from contamination of all sorts, access to health and nutritional services, employment and income policies, and international trade policies, where food sovereignty is prioritized over the economic interests associated with free trade (CONTAG 2015: 17). Food thus becomes a vehicle to transform relations, with food sovereignty guiding the change. Namely, any reductionist conception of food is challenged here through an understanding that food is embedded into society, politics, economy, culture, and ecology. The elaboration and expansion of the meanings of food sovereignty correlates with progress in wellbeing and in public policies for food and nutritional security in the country, which have advanced significantly since 2003. Brazil achieved its lowest rate of food insecurity in 2013: 22.6%, with severe food insecurity at 3.2%. This progress can be attributed to a combination of policies for poverty reduction and food access. Civil society and social movements, including the

activists of the *Marcha*, were all key advocates behind these policies. As the years passed, the issue of hunger gradually disappeared from the public debate, paving the way for broader political projects related to food.

- 18 In 2016, however, a political and economic crisis erupted. Following a congressional coup against President Dilma Roussef, an interim administration introduced austerity measures and began taking action to dismantle public food and nutritional security policy. The setbacks in this area were indeed severe: food insecurity spiraled to 59.4% in 2020 (Galindo et al. 2021). The concept of food sovereignty thus takes on new connotations in what we classified as a fourth phase in its development, which starts in the documents of the *Marcha das Margaridas* 2019. In that year, it appears as one of the 10 political premises of the *Marcha*, together with the defense of energy sovereignty: “For the self-determination of peoples, with energy and food sovereignty.” These three goals are articulated in a new political context, in which the ultraconservative right-wing politician Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil. Since 2000, the *Margaridas* had engaged with the president, negotiating their political agenda with the national executive. In 2019, they decided to break with this tradition, as there was little hope of reaching an agreement with an administration clearly unreceptive to their demands, one that criminalized agrarian and feminist movements. Instead, the *Margaridas* focused on denouncing the abuse of rights and spreading their message to other state branches, international organizations, and society at large. In this context, food sovereignty has assumed a new meaning, emphasizing questions of democracy and power associated with the word sovereignty. When referring to the issue of self-determination, food sovereignty means people can make decisions related to their food systems, respecting the food culture of the territories. In other words, as noted in the *Margaridas* text, this was about “the right of peoples and nations to defend their food culture and to decide on the transformation of food cultivation, distribution, consumption, and preparation” (CONTAG 2019: 9). In terms of their feminist agenda, they demand the recognition of women from the land, the forest, and the water as political subjects of their communities who breathe life into the territories. Through their work women promote food and nutritional sovereignty and security through self-consumption, exchange, donations, taking to market, and reproduction.

## ***Marcha das Margaridas*: A feminist political food sovereignty project both rural and popular**

- 19 According to Sachs and Patel-Campillo (2014), feminist food justice involves at least three agendas: supporting food production at multiple scales, revaluing food work that feeds families, and providing good food to all. The first of these agendas requires access to land on the part of women and dispossessed groups as well as state policies to promote food production by these groups. The second involves redefining gender roles, challenging the heteronormative household model and the sexual division of labor and shifting food preparation to community kitchens, improving farm workers’ rights, promoting the value of good food, and educating consumers about it. The third and final agenda relates to the state’s commitment to guarantee food for all, taking into account food inequalities related to class, gender, race, and citizenship status. We believe that the *Marcha das Margaridas* contributes to a feminist food justice agenda, within the tradition of Latin American popular feminism and as part of food

sovereignty movements. From the situated perspective of the *Margaridas* as women from the field, the forest, and the waters, five of the themes they develop made critical contributions to building a feminist food sovereignty agenda both rural and popular in Brazil: 1) food as a right and a commons; 2) state support for food production by women from the field, the forest, and the waters; 3) the value of uncommodified food work; 4) environmental recovery through agroecology; 5) violence-free food, produced through respectful social relations.

### **From a critique of the agrifood system to a perspective of food as a right and a commons**

- 20 In line with Latin American popular feminism, the *Margaridas* demand a rights-based and decommodified approach and understanding of food as a commons. In their view, the state must protect, foster, and guarantee food access, and take a stance against free market forces that transforms food into a commodity (CONTAG 2007). The causes for food insecurity, the activists note, can be traced to a macroeconomic model that begets social exclusion, non-living wages, unemployment, land concentration, the commodification of water, the debilitation of public services and welfare policies, and hardships for family farming. In this way, the *Margaridas'* analysis goes beyond a critique of agrarian capitalism to include its cultural dimensions. Free trade transforms food into a product and impacts negatively on food cultures: by relying on heavy marketing investments, the expansion of industrial and imported foods influence food habits and contribute to poor nutrition and health (CONTAG 2007). In opposition to this model, the text defends food as a right and a commons, on par with land, water, genetic resources, and biodiversity. These are the people's "heritage," and go against the interests of big agrifood corporations (CONTAG 2007).
- 21 Once food is established as a right and a commons, the state becomes responsible for having a hand in markets and procurement, policies that run afoul with free market ideologies. In this regard, some important achievements of the early years included the passage of a law on public school food establishing that a percentage of products must be purchased from family farms (2009), a constitutional amendment to include the human right to food (2010), and the strengthening of public policies and programs for family farming, food, and nutritional security, and agroecological and organic farming. Civil society organizations have been an active lobby, monitoring and pushing for progress at institutions like the National Council of Food and Nutritional Security. The *Marcha's* text from 2011 refers to the state's Food Acquisition Programme (PAA, its Portuguese acronym), which aims to address food production, distribution, and consumption at local levels. The National School Meals Program (PNAE, its Portuguese acronym) connects family and local agroecological production to schools, community kitchens and restaurants, food banks, and local markets. In 2015, when assessing Brazilian achievements related to food and nutritional sovereignty and security, the text describes how poverty, food insecurity, and infant mortality have all decreased due to a steady rise in wages amongst the poorest Brazilians, increased access (including for women) to food and nutritional security policies, investments in family farming, and programs to address vulnerability of communities living in semi-arid regions. However, as the text notes, some segments remain excluded from these processes and there is a need to tackle structural cases: traditional communities, the



Black population, and the many rural poor. In addition, Brazil is experiencing an epidemic of obesity that can be attributed to the rise in processed industrial foods (CONTAG 2015: 20).

- 22 In short, food is never framed in individual terms such as food choice or food behavior in these documents: it is always as a social and political problem, a collective topic that requires public policies. In addition, the documents from the *Marcha* refer to myriad ways of organizing food relations: agroecology, agroforestry, farmers' markets, fair trade, solidarity economy, the promotion of food cultures. These challenges dominate understandings of food relations as market relations, embedding food production, distribution, and consumption in society's values and cultures of care in order to dispute neoliberal conceptions that measure society in market values.

### Public policies to support diversity in food production by women from the field, the forest, and the waters

- 23 Demands for gendered public policies in food production and distribution are central in all the *Marcha* documents. One particular focus is the need for greater women's participation in policies like land access, lines of credits specific to women, technical assistance, and agroecological production policies. The text argues that public policies strengthen women and should be aligned with their wishes, demands, forms of production, and lives. Women within CONTAG unions have always fought against a gendered state that treats male farmers as their model citizens. Women generally do not participate in decision-making bodies and are unable to influence public policies more conducive to reaching food and nutritional sovereignty and security.
- 24 The struggle for land rights during the first years of the *Marcha* is a clear example of addressing women's perpetually subordinate position to the man of the family, be the husband, father, or brother. Land rights is thus a core dimension of a feminist food sovereignty agenda, even before the term was used, as it implies women's autonomy in food production and distribution. Without such rights, women cannot access loans without a man's signature and they are excluded from decision-making on issues such as production planning. One of the main goals in the 2000 and 2003 mobilizations of the *Margaridas* was the demand for women's effective participation in agrarian reform, which they achieved in 2003. Until that year, land possession or ownership under agrarian reform tended to be assigned automatically to the man in the case of heterosexual couples. Since then, there has been an increase in joint titles and land concession for men or women, or both, regardless of marital status, in keeping with the provisions of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution (Borghoff Maia *et al.* 2021).
- 25 The focus on land rights began expanding in 2007 to include other issues, when the first mobilizing topic of the *Marcha*'s political agenda became Land, Water, and Agroecology; this has been at the forefront of the *Marcha* since then. The *Margaridas* establish democratic access to land and water as a prerequisite to any other demand and to food sovereignty, the exercise of citizenship, and life itself. It is worth noting that the demands for food sovereignty account for gender, racial, and ethnic difference and for diverse food production methods. It "also means respecting the cultures and diversities of peasant, fishermen, and Indigenous means of agrarian and pastoral production, taking to market, and the management of rural spaces, in which women play a fundamental role" (CONTAG 2015: 17). Therefore, a feminist food sovereignty agenda

both rural and popular accounts for the diversity of subjects, identities, and ways of living.

## Recognizing Uncommodified Food Work

- 26 Drawing on feminist economy and feminist socialism, the *Marcha* calls attention to the way in which capitalism and patriarchy articulate in the sexual division of labor and the value hierarchies for different activities. By fostering values like nutritious and quality food, and culturally appropriate food, food sovereignty recognizes the value of work traditionally done by women. The 2011 text invites women to reflect on their contribution to food and nutritional security. After all, although rural women produce more nutritious and diverse foods for domestic consumption that enhances family nutrition, such work is not recognized or valued in food production, because it is not intended for foreign markets. In the sexual division of labor associated with food preparation, women are mainly or even solely responsible for the family meals. In food consumption, there are nutritional inequalities within the family, as men and children are prioritized when food is scarce, leaving women more vulnerable to food insecurity (CONTAG 2011). Similar to the contradictions between women's role in food production and their vulnerability to food insecurity, the text calls attention to the paradoxical concentration of food insecurity among rural populations (CONTAG 2011).<sup>6</sup>
- 27 The text of 2015 explains that women's work in food production is not appreciated for various reasons: when women work in cash crop fields, this is considered "help," not work. Women cannot or do not dedicate all their time to producing cash crops for market; they also spend time cultivating various food crops for self-consumption and thus contribute to protecting agrobiodiversity and family nutrition. Often these are produced in the areas closer to home, or in the household gardens, making this food production part of domestic work, and thus invisible. Women alone are responsible for food preparation, as with many other domestic chores, but their efforts in these areas are neither recognized nor valued as work. By counterposing monocrops destined to distant markets, on the one hand, and fostering fresh and diverse foods for direct consumption, on the other hand, food sovereignty casts women's work in a new light. "Self-consumption is one of the main strategies to guarantee food sovereignty, by assuring an improvement in the quality of food, reducing the expenses associated with food, and increasing the autonomy of the family vis-à-vis the market" (CONTAG 2015: 21).
- 28 If the goal is food sovereignty and not just market profits, all production activities for self-consumption and care work must be valued. Because they carry out most of these activities, and in some cases are even solely responsible for them, women thus become protagonists in this model, instead of being seen as just the male farmer's "helpers." When these activities receive the recognition they deserve, there is more room to redefine and share responsibilities between family members, overcoming the traditional roles in the sexual division of labor. Instead of feminizing the work associated with food production for self-consumption and food preparation, this could be a chance for a new gender order. Food sovereignty would thus become a vehicle for transforming not only the environment relations inherent to food production, but also gender relations.

- 29 In this regard, the *Marcha* documents insist on the need to deconstruct the patriarchal vision that blames women and their entry to the labor market for the changes in the eating habits of the Brazilian population and the obesity epidemic: “The sexual division of domestic work is fundamental, where food-related responsibilities are shared by all members” (CONTAG 2015: 21). In this way, the *Marcha das Margaridas* elaborated on gender inequalities in the food system that also affect urban women. The goal of valuing uncommodified food work is constructed so as to avoid establishing that women are naturally better at these activities, or that they constitute inherently female work, and instead extend an invitation for a shared responsibility that does not reinforce traditional gender roles.

### Environmental recovery in food production: promoting agroecology

- 30 In 2000 and 2003, environmental dimensions of food production are mentioned in a critique of the technological fixes aimed at achieving food security, a model widely supported during the agrarian “modernization” associated with Brazil’s Green Revolution. The text lists the multi-dimensional impacts of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics, and hormones: health impacts on food consumers and rural workers, environmental contamination, pest resistance, soil degradation, and the economic impacts caused by a dependency on agricultural inputs (CONTAG 2000).
- 31 Over time, the environmental issue becomes increasingly important on the political agenda. In 2003, the presence of the word “environment” starts increasing in their visual materials, and is treated as a priority issue in their documents. Agroecology is the point where the environmentalist agenda is articulated with the food sovereignty agenda. This can partially be attributed to the National Agroecology Conference (*Encontro Nacional de Agroecologia*) held in Rio de Janeiro in 2002, and the *Marcha*’s partnerships with organizations members from ANA, an alliance that continued to grow over the years (since its foundation, ANA has been involved in the *Marcha*’s activities, and vice-versa). The *Marcha* considers agroecology to be a key element of the Alternative Project for Sustainable Rural Development from CONTAG, which strives for environmental protection and socioeconomic stability for family farmers. The *Margaridas*, however, claim that the biggest challenge is to awaken an agroecological consciousness and transform the newly awakened into a political force that draws on various scattered experiences; by thus mobilizing, public policies on family farming may become possible (CONTAG 2003: 19). Agroecology combines both environmental sustainability and social equity; it respects the diversity of each ecosystem in Brazil and values the knowledge, experience, and culture of those who farm the land, including women. Agroecology enters the *Marcha* agenda not as something unfamiliar to its grassroots supporters, but as part of the practices and cumulative knowledge of many rural workers, women and men alike. Rural working women play a key role in agrobiodiversity and seed conservation, plant knowledge, and the preservation of food cultures.
- 32 Starting in 2007, the connections between agricultural production, environmental recovery, and food quality grew more profound. Agroecology is depicted as both a production method and a certain relationship between human beings and the environment within this production. It goes beyond the process and includes the product, e.g., healthy and quality food (CONTAG 2007). An emblematic example of the

*Margaridas'* contribution to a feminist food sovereignty agenda was the struggle for a public policy to promote agroecological yards. These are spaces adjacent to rural households for agrobiodiverse, agroecological production where women grow medicinal plants, raise small animals, and take care of the environment, helping Earth recover its ability to host and reproduce life. The policy was implemented in 2015. Agroecology “respects and promotes social, biological, and cultural diversity, benefiting all society and the planet, guaranteeing access to these foods for future generations” (CONTAG 2015: 20). The ANA slogan embraced by the *Marcha*, “without feminism there is no agroecology,” summarizes how agroecology transitions to ecological farming and social change in gender relations are interrelated. It describes the kind of food sovereignty this feminist mobilization aims to achieve.

### **Against sexist and other forms of violence in the countryside: building new, respectful social relations**

- 33 Since the *Margaridas* formed, their concern about sexist violence was second only to hunger. At the first march, in 2000, the *Margaridas* adopted the slogan from the World March of Women: “against poverty, hunger, and sexist violence.” This remained the slogan for the next two marches (2003 and 2007). This slogan is clearly a tribute to the popular feminism from the mid-1990s that combined demands from working classes hard hit by neoliberal economics in Latin America and the increase in poverty and hunger. Now, however, it was being combined with an awareness of women’s domination and a consensus with historic feminist demands against sexist violence.
- 34 The *Marcha* articulates an anti-capitalist critique of the agrifood system with an analysis of patriarchal relations, revealing how the intersection of class and gender affects rural working women in particular ways, as seen in sexist violence (CONTAG 2007). The dominant agrarian model that generates poverty, combined with a lack of welfare state policies, necessarily impacts women more than men because of the asymmetrical division in care work. Additionally, the lack of women’s economic autonomy—given that her farm work is not recognized as such—also makes women more vulnerable to domestic violence. The persistence of patriarchy “reproduces gender inequalities in the countryside, discriminates against women, and contributes to persistently high poverty levels and sexist violence” (CONTAG 2007).
- 35 However, the political agenda of the *Marcha* goes beyond sexist violence and calls attention to the high rate of violence in rural areas due to conflicts over land, water, and infrastructure projects. Land and environmental activists in Brazil are exposed to threats from private security forces and militias, which are given free rein to kill in a highly selective court system where crimes often go unpunished. The *Marcha*’s political project is for a life free from all forms of violence in the countryside. This demand also coincides with the political banner of food sovereignty. According to the documents of the *Marcha*, the core element defining food sovereignty are new types of social relations free from oppression and based on respect and equality across class, gender, and race (CONTAG 2011).

## Food and gender: from hierarchical relations to feminist mobilizations

- 36 Since its beginning, the *Marcha* has elaborated an anti-capitalist critique of the global agrifood system that identifies various types of inequalities—material, cultural, embodied, and environmental—and processes of destitution in all nodes of the food chain, from production to consumption. The discussion of food insecurity is embedded in the debate of structural inequalities: it affects people in different ways and there are differentiated responsibilities for its cause and solutions. From the situated perspective of the rural working class, the documents of the *Margaridas* thus emphasize how food insecurity intersects with class and urban-rural inequalities. This anti-capitalist critique includes symbolic aspects and alternative meanings of food relations. Food cultures, after all, are also about community and solidarity-building across rural and urban peoples, while the commodification of food is about dissolving bonds.
- 37 Their resistance and oppositional agency question the very concepts used in the agrifood system: the *Margaridas* speak of food as a human right and a commons, not a product or commodity. By embedding their historical demands against hunger and the guarantee of food and nutritional security into discourse of agrarian movements, namely, “food sovereignty,” they opt not to discuss hunger in terms of income or food access and instead speak of power asymmetries and a democratic politics of food. This evolved as a counter-discourse to food security that questioned the latter’s focus on the aggregate tons of agricultural production and the world population; food sovereignty instead draws attention to the structural dimension of hunger and the social, economic, and political inequalities involved in food production, distribution, and consumption. According to this view, the fight against hunger cannot be disassociated from various dimensions of inequalities, because hunger is understood in its structural dimension.
- 38 What would represent a feminist contribution to such a project? The *Marcha das Margaridas* articulates capitalist critique and class analysis from a gendered lens of the structural inequalities (class, gender, and rural-urban inequalities) rural working women face. They analyze the inequalities that permeate these women’s experience in multiple domains: the household, agrarian production, access to public policies, their political participation within the union movement. Women’s key role in food production that involves diverse, nutritious, healthy food is not recognized as productive work; care work such as food preparation is not valued; and food as a social good is distributed unequally between genders, with men receiving the best portions. In a stance against gender inequalities, the *Marcha* proposes to value women’s contribution to food sovereignty while staying alert to the risk of women being bound to these roles and reproductive work. Rather, as feminists, the goal is to change the values assigned to the activities that promote food sovereignty, so that men, women, states, and markets all share the responsibility. The *Marcha* highlights that food sovereignty must be defined by new types of social relations that are free from oppression and based on respect and equality across class, gender, and race, while also respecting the environment. In this sense, the *Marcha das Margaridas* has been developing their own feminist understanding of food sovereignty as a banner, a vehicle, that brings together many of their historic demands.
- 39 Using a broad agenda, the *Margaridas* challenge the gender hierarchies that structure society, politics, economy, and culture and struggle for transformations that ensure

gender equity in the agrifood system and society as a whole. Bearing in mind the importance of advancing the knowledge of women's and feminist food sovereignty activism (Masson *et al.* 2017), this paper set out to analyze the contribution the *Marcha das Margaridas* to the food sovereignty agenda. The situated perspective of women from the field, the forest, and the waters, a perspective the *Marcha das Margaridas* has adopted as its own, contributes to building a feminist food justice and food sovereignty that is both rural and popular. Their contribution is anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, decolonial, and ecological.

- 40 First, popular feminism advocates for an understanding of food as a commons and a rights, thus including food in its tradition of defending a rights-based approach to common goods such as health, education, transport, and housing. Second, for decades, rural feminists have been struggling for land reform, land entitlements, and territorial rights for Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in Brazil, and for women's access to labor rights and public policies. These groups have also defended food production by women through access to credits, technical assistance, state-led institutional markets, and political participation in decision making. Third, popular feminism advocates for the recognition and value of uncommodified food work as part of a tradition of valuing social reproductive work, the state provision of childcare, and social welfare for families. The *Marcha das Margaridas* also challenges gender roles in food preparation, calling for a redistribution of household responsibilities. Fourth, rural popular feminism challenges reductionist conceptions of land, water, and forests as natural resources to instead defend a view of nature as a common good, one that should be protected by promoting livelihoods that recover nature and allow for the reproduction of life. This feminism takes up the agroecological agenda, the defense of ecologies, and good quality and nutritional food as its core values. Finally, sexist violence has been a constant issue in the agenda of popular feminist movements. The rural popular feminists of the *Marcha das Margaridas* also defend a life free from all types of violence in the countryside, a space within Brazil characterized by colonial relations and high rates of murder and violence. These women advocate for respectful social relations, and challenge the patriarchy, sexism, and racism that structure social relations in the country.
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## NOTES

1. Available at: [<http://www.fao.org/brasil/noticias/detail-events/pt/c/1157560/>], accessed October 1, 2020.

2. Food insecurity was an issue for 55.7% of urban households and 75.2% of rural households (the national average is 59.4%). Food insecurity is more common in households with only one breadwinner (66.3%) and is even more accentuated when the head of the household is a woman (73.8%) or a person racialized as brown [Pardo] (67.8%) or Black [Preto] (66.8%) (Galindo et al 2021).



3. The name is a tribute to Margarida Maria Alves, a union leader from Paraíba, a state in the northeast of Brazil. In retaliation for her long-term struggle for the labor rights of rural workers, Margarida was murdered in 1983. The first national mobilization in 2000 was organized in August to demand punishment for her murderers, who were on trial at that time.
  4. Interview with Nalu Faria by Marco Antonio Teixeira on September 9, 2019.
  5. “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to decide their own food and production system, based on healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced in a sustainable and ecological way, which places those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, above the demands of the markets and companies, while also defending the interests and assuring the inclusion of future generations. This declaration also affirms the need to prioritize local production and consumption circuits that strengthen family agriculture, peasant farming, and artisanal fishermen” (CONTAG 2011).
  6. Recent survey data from a national representative public opinion survey confirms this urban-rural inequality, as noted earlier.
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## ABSTRACTS

*The Marcha das Margaridas* is a coalition of women and feminism movements, agrarian movements, trade unions, and international organizations that emerged in 2000. Women’s organizations that are part of a rural trade federation lead the process. While its initial agenda included gendered class-based demands for the recognition of women’s work in food production, access to land titles and labour rights, the *Marcha das Margaridas* progressively incorporated other topics, such as agroecology and food sovereignty. The article addresses three questions: How did food sovereignty enter their agenda? What is the meaning of food sovereignty for them? How can food sovereignty be understood from a (popular) feminist perspective? Our research is based on participant observation in the last two *Marchas* (2015 and 2019), interviews with activists, and document analysis.

*La Marcha das Margaridas* est une coalition de mouvements de femmes et de féministes, de mouvements agraires, de syndicats et d’organisations internationales qui a vu le jour en 2000. Les organisations de femmes, au sein d’un syndicat rural, dirigent le processus. En commençant par des revendications - fondées sur le genre et la classe sociale, pour la reconnaissance du travail des femmes dans la production alimentaire, l’accès aux titres fonciers et les droits du travail - *la Marcha das Margaridas* a progressivement intégré d’autres sujets dans son programme, tels que l’agroécologie et la souveraineté alimentaire. L’article aborde trois questions : Comment la souveraineté alimentaire est-elle entrée dans leur programme ? Quelle est la signification de la souveraineté alimentaire pour leur mobilisation ? Comment comprendre la souveraineté alimentaire dans une perspective féministe (populaire) ? Notre recherche est basée sur l’observation participante des deux dernières éditions de la manifestation (en 2015 et en 2019), les entretiens avec des activistes et l’analyse de documents.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** food sovereignty, feminism, women's movements, agrarian movements, rural women, gender, food, Marcha das Margaridas, Brazil

**Mots-clés:** souveraineté alimentaire, féminisme, mouvements de femmes, mouvements agraires, femmes rurales, genre, alimentation, Marcha das Margaridas, Brésil

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