

## THE ASSOCIATIVE ACTION OF URBAN AND PERI-URBAN WOMEN FARMERS IN NORTHEAST, BRAZIL: POWER DYNAMICS AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to identify opportunities and challenges arising from the strategic alliances between small-scale female cultivators in the sector of urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA) and other members of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) movement in Northeast Brazil. Results are drawn from a qualitative analysis based on interviews with 50 women active in UPA groups/associations in the states of Ceará and Pernambuco, and with 14 SSE local leaders in July-August 2016. While many studies in the field deal with community dynamics and movement-building among landless rural workers and peasant collective struggles for land access and social justice, little attention has yet been devoted to investigate the political role of female UPA associative work within the SSE. Thus, the proposed study aims to expand the critical analysis of social movements by examining, from an intersectional feminist perspective, the following questions: How do women active in collective UPA initiatives and living in favelas involve and position themselves within the SSE movement? Do they use the space of marginality to fight for their rights and negotiate their claims? Does the associative work help to combat the perpetuation of patriarchal relations and other entrenched hierarchies of power? Finally, what are the outcomes of those alliances promoting dissident expressions of resistance against postcolonial social exclusion, particularly from Afro-Brazilian and indigenous native women?

**Keywords:** social and solidarity economy, power dynamics, strategic alliances, women, urban-periurban agriculture

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## ALIANÇA ASSOCIATIVA DAS MULHERES URBANAS E PERIURBANAS NO NORDESTE, BRASIL: DINÂMICA DE PODER E ALIANÇAS ESTRATÉGICAS

**Resumo:** O objetivo do artigo é identificar oportunidades e desafios decorrentes das alianças estratégicas entre cultivadoras de pequena escala da agricultura urbana e periurbana (AUP) e outros membros da economia social e solidária (ESS) no Nordeste do Brasil. Os resultados são oriundos de uma análise qualitativa baseada em entrevistas com 50 mulheres ativas em grupos e associações da AUP nos estados do Ceará e Pernambuco, além de 14 líderes locais da ESS, em julho-agosto de 2016. Enquanto muitos estudos lidam com as dinâmicas comunitárias e construção de movimentos entre trabalhadores rurais sem terra e lutas coletivas camponesas por acesso à terra e justiça social, pouca atenção tem sido dedicada a investigar o papel político do trabalho associativo feminino da AUP dentro da ESS. Assim, este estudo objetiva expandir a análise crítica dos movimentos sociais a partir de uma perspectiva feminista interseccional das seguintes questões: como as mulheres ativas das iniciativas coletivas de AUP e que vivem em favelas se envolvem e se posicionam dentro do movimento de ESS? Será que elas usam o espaço da marginalidade para lutar por seus direitos e negociar suas reivindicações? Será que o trabalho associativo ajuda a combater a perpetuação das relações patriarcais e outras hierarquias arraigadas de poder? Finalmente, quais os resultados dessas alianças para promoção de expressões dissidentes de resistência contra exclusão social pós-colonial, em particular das mulheres afrobrasileiras e indígenas?

**Palavras-chave:** economia social e solidária, dinâmicas de poder, alianças estratégicas, mulheres, agricultura urbana e periurbana

### **Context**

Throughout history, Brazil has struggled with high levels of poverty and inequality. Remarkably, however, the country achieved significant progress in recent years (2003-2013), lifting more than 35 million people out of poverty by means of sustained economic growth and state policies oriented towards economic redistribution, inclusive social programs, and increased employment and educational

opportunities for


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young people (Loman & Rauws, 2014). However, for a middle-income country, poverty and inequality remain high with 21.4% of the population still living below the poverty line (Index Mundi, 2016). Striking evidence of this deep-set trend may be found in the Northeast region, home to more than 53 million people and one an area with a bold ethnic and cultural mix of indigenous peoples and descendants of African slaves and European colonizers. According to the World Bank (2014:1), this region “accounted for more than half of the country's poor”. Further, urban poverty continues to increase, as is evidenced by high wage differentials, poor access to public services, food price inflation, inadequate housing, and environmentally degraded areas. To fight such poverty and social exclusion, urban agriculture can represent a realistic ingredient (Mkwambisi et al. 2011). In this project, the expression "urban and peri-urban agriculture" and its acronym (UPA) refers to “the growing of plants – edible and non- edible – and the raising of animals for food and other uses within and around cities and towns” (de Bon et al., 2010:1 from Van Veenhuizen 2006). The role of UPA in enhancing household food supplies is often emphasized, yet its effect on local livelihoods through the generation of cash income or employment is rarely considered. The majority of existing studies indicate that UPA is an important source of food production throughout the urban developing world and is a critical food security strategy for poor urban households. Some studies in developing or emerging countries stress that UPA does not represent an economic activity, but rather a survival strategy for the farmers and their families which prevents hunger and mainly serves an auto- consumption function (Coovadia 1995; Mougeot 1994; 2001).

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the power dynamics and strategic alliances between women practicing UPA through associative movements established in the favelas (slums) or precarious settlements of Ceará and Pernambuco in the Northeast



of Brazil, and other local leaders of the social and solidarity economy, in light of their situated experiences and challenges. In Brazil, as in most other South Global countries,



women form the bulk of urban farmers, consistent with their usual social reproductive responsibilities such as feeding the household. The proximity of the plots to the residence also allows women to avoid excessive travelling, thus facilitating the combination of farming activities with their other tasks (Van Veenhuizen & Danso 2007). However, the relatively strong divide in gender roles and the prevailing female engagement in urban agriculture can burden women in two ways. Women who are not engaged in other income generating activities usually spend all of their time on household domestic duties, since they are generally responsible for household maintenance and looking after children, elders, and the sick. In addition to increasing a woman's daily burden of work, any lessening of her spare time may prevent her from acquiring higher-paying informal or formal sector employment. In this sense, urban agriculture could become "a low-income trap which imprisons unskilled women" (Lee, Binns & Dixon, 2010: 2). While such structural constraints may deprive these women of their formal rights to citizenship, women are not necessarily "passive victims". Active citizenship can also be expressed through social mobility and political empowerment initiatives whereby marginalized women can challenge existing gender and social inequalities. What is known as the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) seems particularly relevant for local women's cooperatives as it targets disadvantaged groups of people. In the last two decades, the SSE in Brazil has shown its potential to be an alternative source of employment and income for people marginalized by the capitalist market, as illustrated by projects presented as "success stories". The Brazilian Solidarity Economy Forum (BSEF) reported that the SSE is a "fruit of the organization of workers in the construction of new economic and social practices grounded in relations of partnership collaboration, inspired by cultural values that place the human being as subject and purpose of economic activity, rather than the private accumulation of wealth in general and in particular capital" (BSEF



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2006: 3). In the same vein, Guérin and Nobre (2015: 425) draw attention to its “public-spirited commitments betting on the

collective interest and solidarity rather than the pursuit of profit” despite the fact that SSE includes a broad and heterogeneous range of actors (cooperatives, trade-unions, university networks, self-help groups, community-based organizations, religious and/or service-provisioning NGOs, feminist, and ecologic groups, among others) with agendas, values, and practices equally diverse. Notwithstanding the interest in SSE, little attention has yet been devoted to investigating the socio-economic and political role of female UPA associative work within the SSE in Northeast Brazil.

A review of the existing literature reveals that UPA is practiced in all the five regions of the country, although it still lacks full support from national and local governments (FAO 2014). Some studies conducted in Belo Horizonte (close to the state of Rio de Janeiro) highlight the need to promote family farming targeting women, who are often considered as a “vulnerable” group, through the intervention of local authorities, as well as in collaboration with others actors belonging to civil society or the private sector (Dubbeling & Van Veenhuizen 2014). In the case of Pernambuco, Farfán (2008) analyzed the social and economic profile of the farmers at the community gardens in Juazeiro and Petrolina. However, his work did not explore the possible links between UPA cooperative activities and women’s socioeconomic rights and empowerment within the SSE; it rather emphasized how UPA has positive outcomes at the household level in terms of income and sparing national farming capacity by reducing expenditure on food at household level. Many studies in the SSE field deal with community dynamics and movement-building among landless rural workers such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) in Brazil and peasant collective struggles for land access and social justice through social movements like La Via Campesina, which is currently the largest global movement representing small- and medium-scale farmers, peasants, agricultural workers, rural women, and indigenous communities. Thus, the novelty



of this presentation is its expansion of the critical analysis of social movements by examining the existing challenges to and opportunities



for achieving socioeconomic and political transformations through UPA women's associations.

### ***Theoretical framework***

The theoretical framework used in this research draws on and contributes to the body of postcolonial and intersectional feminist theories on women's empowerment in the context of SSE. "Conventionally, power is seen as a zero-sum concept that involves having „power over“ others, as an instrument of domination" (Gioia 2012: 41). Diverging from this rigid construction of negative power, feminist theorists suggest a fluid process involving three relational levels: the "power within," the "power with," and the "power to" (Kabeer 2005). The power within refers to Freire's concept of individual conscientization, as well as a person's self-worth and self-knowledge. The "power with" suggests the ability to work collectively and is "[b]ased on mutual support, solidarity, collaboration, and recognition and respect for differences" (Miller & al, 2006: 6). Both, the power within and the power with, can be tied to the power to affect change. Such understanding of power also known as relational empowerment will further contextualize our operationalization of empowerment as a „bottom-up approach“ that goes beyond participation in decision-making to include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions" (Sharp & al.

2003: 283). However critics of this alternative vision of power argue that empowerment requires an understanding and deconstruction of the systemic oppressive forces that cause powerlessness. Among them, postcolonial feminist scholars (Spivak 1988; Mohanty 2004) have denounced the misleading and simplistic assumption that "Third World" women constitute a homogenous group which needs to be modernized and secularized in order to be "liberated" from patriarchy and underdevelopment. Their critique points to the insight that power relations encompass



multiple categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age that don't operate as

“unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” also referred to as “intersectionality” (Collins, 2015: 1).

### ***Methodology***

Inspired by Donna Haraway's (1991) approach in favour of partial visions, this communication proposes to put women at the centre of knowledge production through a socially situated lens, including a diversity of marginalized/racialized (others) points of view. In its effort to eliminate the distance that normally separates researchers from participants, situated knowledge further recognizes that it is the latter – the members of the UPA women's associations – who are the "experts" about their concrete social experience. According to the feminist standpoint perspective, the research design used a qualitative method relying on a series of in-depth interviews with two different populations: (1) women who are members of UPA associations and (2) key informants represented by public figures from a variety of SSE-driven organizations. In the initial phase (summer 2016), 50 semi-structured individual interviews were carried with a multi-stage, random sample of landless women active in UPA associations in the states of Ceará (25) and Pernambuco (25). Interviewees were recruited from local women's associations identified through available municipality lists, as well as through the personal contacts of our Brazilian colleagues. The average duration of each interview was 45 minutes to one hour, and interviews were recorded with the agreement of the participants and later transcribed and translated into English. In the same period, 14 additional individual interviews (seven each in Ceará and Pernambuco) were carried out with leaders of a variety of SSE-driven organizations. In order to minimize the risk of important informants being omitted from the study, they were recruited by means of a snowball sampling strategy wherein the



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first key informant was asked to identify the next key informant. Topics discussed did include: (1) the current situation regarding

control structures, negotiation processes, benefits, and limits of the existing formal and informal alliances between UPA cooperatives and other SSE organizations; (2) the discourses and politics of solidarity pointing to intersectional thinking in the daily practices of these organizations; (3) the opportunities for and challenges to the integration of a broad spectrum of UPA associations within the SSE and; (4) ongoing and anticipated strategies to critically reflect and overcome (decolonize) postcolonial power relations and to promote participatory processes and active forms of inclusive citizenship. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese, and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Particular attention was paid to consent procedures and participants- investigator relationships with an emphasis on trust, empathy, and respect. Participants did receive an honorarium equivalent to approximately two hours of work income for their time at interviews. In order to protect their anonymity and confidentiality, interviews were made in compliance with the standards and procedures governing research with human beings adopted by the Canadian Tri-Agency Research Integrity Policy. Although organizations names are provided with their authorization, fictitious names prevent to identify respondents' identities. Following a qualitative data analysis with the software NVivo11, the emerging themes were grouped into categories such as impact on income, socioeconomic and relational empowerment, social positioning, strategic alliances, power dynamics and future challenges.

### ***Women's Situated Experiences of UPA***

Among the 50 female farmers interviewed most are mothers or grandmothers, self-defining heterosexual and with little or no schooling, except for a few of them, the youngest, who have completed high school and in two cases, graduate studies. All 25



respondents from the state of Pernambuco live in poor neighborhoods located in four (Recife, Jaboatão dos Guararapes, Olinda and Paulista) of the 14 municipalities of the

Metropolitan Region of Recife with the highest state-wide concentration of favelas: 869 out of 1075 (Mota, 2013). Most of them declare to be either “pardas” (multiracial) or “morenas-pretas/ negras” (mixed dark and black) and, to a lesser extent “brancas” (whites). Within this group, many are active members of community health centers such as the Centro de Saúde Alternativa da Muribeca, the Jaboatão dos Guararapes Centro de Saúde Condor-Cabo Gato, and the Olinda Centro de Formação em Medicina Popular. These centers are devoted to the cultivation of medicinal plants, as well as to their transformation and commercialization into remedies for therapeutic purposes. Others are members of women’s cooperatives producing vegetables (cassava, yam, corn and beans), in addition to various species of fruit trees and native trees.

The 25 female farmers from the state of Ceará live in the suburbs of Fortaleza (the capital) or, particularly those from Afrodescendant (Quilombolas or Maroons) and Indigenous (Cablocas) ancestries, in more remote villages. The former, namely those from hinterland settlement Quilombo Serra do Jua Caucaia experience strenuous economic conditions: isolated from the city, they still have no sewage network and no sanitation (toilets are simple pits dug outside the houses), and electric power is supplied by fuel generators. Known for its rich biodiversity and a consolidated family agriculture, the region concentrates one of the largest bauxite reserves in the country, which has attracted developers and mining interests leading to environmental degradation. To defend itself, the community has radicalized its struggles for the regularization of Quilombola territories in Ceará. Meanwhile, women travel longer distances to collect water in containers with the help of domestic animals. Similarly, the latter, i.e. the indigenous people of Jenipapo-Kanindé, who are descendants of the Payaku and the Tapuias of the Northeast, have a long track record of fighting for their rights. In February 2011, this ethnic group finally conquered the definitive possession of its lands. One of the key figures of this battle was



Cacique Pequeña, the first Brazilian woman to hold a post of Head of the village. In 2012, the chieftaincy was passed on to



her daughter, Juliana Alves (Cacique Iré). Today, the 325 individuals of the village inhabit the Lagoon of the Encantada – “a sacred space from which they derive their myths, cosmology, history and their own survival” (Povos Indigenas no Brasil, 2017). Located in the municipality of Aquirás, at about 50 km from Fortaleza, the village is difficult to access due to a lack of paved streets. Although there is electrical power, it is often thwarted by outages, exacerbating the risks of physical and sexual aggressions. Several attacks have been reported, particularly against women. Interestingly though, while gender violence resonates strongly among members of the Jenipapo-Kanindé Indigenous Women's Association, it is often solved by bringing the issue to the community. As mentioned by Estela :

“We always seek to involve the rest of the community, to be in interaction with each other. At the first assembly of indigenous women we did here in the community, we managed to bring to this House Maria da Pena<sup>4</sup>. We made a point of having the presence of men, so that they could also become aware. Thank God, we have never needed to put into practice the Maria da Pena Law”.

Such a participatory approach is grounded on a holistic approach of justice geared towards a communal spiritual experience of a shared land where men and women fulfill the lessons of their ancestors. Not surprisingly, most of the respondents are born from parents who are themselves farmers:

“My father, says Ana, a 31 years old, is illiterate, my mother is semi-literate, but from a young age, our parents already put everyone at work. Teaching us how to go to the fields planting beans, manioc stems, plant on the edge of the lagoon, planting a

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<sup>4</sup> She is a biopharmacist who was left paraplegic for life by her husband who, two weeks after her return from the hospital, tried to electrocute her. While her husband remained free, her case dragged on in court for 20 years. In 2006, the Brazilian government promulgated a law symbolically called "the Maria da Penha Law on domestic and family violence".

vegetable garden, or harvesting of beans, maroons... from very early on, we had this rhythm to pick up a hoe and clean the farm.”

Yet, water supply<sup>5</sup> remains one of the biggest problems facing the community. Severina testifies: “During the periods of drought we don’t have anything to produce”. Furthermore, female farmers feel the strain from a lack of financial resources:

“Today if you do not plant for lack of resource to invest, you can not reap. Last year, my mother made a loan and spent 800 reais for planting, but the earth did not give. Then you are discouraged. This year she planted again, but if she does not (get results), she has already said she will not plant anymore” (Josefa).

As a matter of fact, one of the big surprises of our interviews concerns the small financial contribution linked to the practice of UPA. Far from deriving sufficient profits to cover all family expenses, women in both, Ceará and Pernambuco claimed to find simply a complementary income for the household. While it provides "a way of working, producing, consuming and living together" that upsets the capitalist conception of profit (Guérin and Nobre 2015: 440), UPA does not guarantee economic empowerment. As stated by Eliana, 59 years old: "Here, there is only one thing missing; we lack economic power". This finding is especially troubling since their practice of UPA depends on collective exploitations for which women generally don’t have formal titles of ownership. For instance, some occupy acampamentos (illegal temporary occupancy), while others get assentamentos (settlements), each obtained at a different moment of their participation in the movement for land reform (MST). The latter provides the legal right to use the land, in addition to government credits for agricultural production and construction of masonry houses, as long as people don’t stop production



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<sup>5</sup> The problem is not exclusive to this community. Hit by an unprecedented drought for more than five years, the state has imposed water restrictions that affect almost every town and city in Ceará.

(in which case they can be removed). Consequently social land concessions tend to be precarious and UPA does not offer a strategy to combat food insecurity. As pointed out by Elba, a 45 year“s old female settler from Pernambuco:

“We are undergoing a process to get our ownership rights recognized; there is no documents to prove ownership rights of this land (...). We have worked with my family to become farmers and be treated as such, and all I see makes me sure of these rights”.

Her battle benefits from the support of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra (Landless Workers Movement) in the Metropolitan Region of Recife in Pernambuco. As a result, the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), a federal agency with responsibility over land reform, has agreed to register some assentamentos such as the Chico Mendes III where 55 families occupy approximately 313 ha, plus 100 hectares of legal reserve. Nevertheless, Carline reminds :

“We suffered a lot, because they had many evictions and it was not easy. In order to win a piece of land, we had to fight a lot. Because even the owner was not paying its taxes, and did not want to give up the land. Then, when we occupied some land, the biggest challenge for us here was - and remains - the lack of resources because working without resources is difficult.”

Despite assistance from the Federação Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Agricultores e Agricultoras Familiares do Estado de Ceara (FETRAECE), an institution representing 183 affiliated unions and family farmers, indigeneous women also face all sorts of exclusion and vulnerable situations. Izabel explains:



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“To have a loan to work in farming, vegetable gardens, there is a huge bureaucracy. Earth we have - the genipa americana- kanindé has 1,734 hectares of land, but many times, the farmers

are lost, because the earth needs to be fertilized, needs to be

taken care of, and they do not have the money to buy manure. You need to surround the pieces of land, so that the neighbouring cattle are not eating your plants, but the Fundação Nacional do Índio (National Indian Foundation) often does not give such aid. The forest offers us sticks and stakes for fencing, but there are other factors that affect us and it is precisely because they do not have a policy geared to the small farmers”.

Besides, most female farmers prefer to market their products, especially those from medicinal plants, whose sale price is higher than that of horticultural products. In brief, and contrary to the utilitarian attributes highlighted by the literature, the economic function of UPA appears to be marginal to these women.

### ***Outcomes of UPA Associative Action for Women***

UPA is unanimously seen by women as an opportunity to achieve greater independence and self-esteem, and to obtain social status within the household and the community. In fact, women see their practice as a service driven by social considerations. Luciana, 72 years old, explains: "My motivation to participate is not to make money; I already have some income from other activities. My reasons are more ideological". Like many of her colleagues, it is her faith in solidarity economy activities initiated in the 1990s by priests under the aegis of the Catholic Church that motivates her practice of UPA. Rather than pastoral concerns, it is however the aim of health education, often inspired by the Movimento da Cultura Popular (a social movement raising awareness of the masses through literacy and basic education), that galvanizes these women. For many of them who have migrated from rural to urban areas, UPA is a means of maintaining contact with the land and family practices, while at the same time encouraging the transmission of cultural knowledge to the younger generation.



Another benefit associated with the collective practice of UPA is the ability to work close to their home and to be able to continue to care for the children and the

home simultaneously. Given the patriarchal norms in force, women have the social responsibility to carry out domestic tasks and the possibility of combining them with an agricultural activity is an important factor in the decision to embark on this practice. The impact of prevailing machismo is phrased bluntly by Gorete, 50 years old: "Sometimes women don't come because their husbands don't let them. Men expect that their wives take care of them, give them their medication, prepare their meals, and wash their clothes; those things, unfortunately". This productive and reproductive overload of women reveals one of the weaknesses of the associative movement, which for the time being seems blind to gender inequalities in the family and the community. Beyond the social and affective consequences of solidarity discourse, the sexual division of labor remains an issue scarcely sketched by women farmers. Similarly, the question of colonized and racialized power relations, although openly discussed by women, seems paradoxically absent from their collective projects. To paraphrase Verschuur (2012), the practice of AUP is not enough to guarantee "the taking into account of gender interests nor the transformation of social relations of sex (interweaving with other systems of power) in a more egalitarian sense" (p.20).

### ***Strategic Alliances: Motivations, Struggles and Challenges***

UPA also constitutes a way to meet new people, to acquire new knowledge and skills, and to reinforce solidarity. Learning from collective experience reinforces the women's motivation to enter into social movements: "We are the minority, and if we join we have more strength", points out emphatically Ana Maria, 26 years old. The value attributed to the social empowering aspect of their practice of UPA crystallizes the *raison d'être* of their actions. As stated by Priscila, 58 years old: "the cooperative means everything; it is a life experience to see other people, to talk and make contact with people ". For her part, Christina, 48 years old, adds: "I believe we are





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all invested because the association teaches us a lot, teaches us that we are not alone in this world,

gives us the strength to face difficulties and help others". One of these difficulties is the social stigma associated with medicinal plants cultivation. Dima, 67 years old, recalls: "When we started this kind of work, the community did not respect us very much because they associated us with spiritualism; usually people who are interested in plants, practice *catimbó* [black magic]. But after people saw that we were doing things right, they started to respect us". Another hurdle is the insertion in the marketing networks, a problem attributable to the strict standards that govern the distribution and sale of products. Thanks to the associative movement, women acquire new skills in this field, learn group's dynamics and develop a sense of belonging to a collective project that allows them to overcome differences.

While some participants have created cooperatives in order to take advantage of subsidized credits, others evolve within self-help groups and community-based organizations loosely related to more formal institutions of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) such as the Partido dos Trabalhadores (the political party formerly in power), Liderança Indígena (Indigenous Leadership), Rede de Mulheres Agricultoras (Network of Female Farmers), Universities (mainly those with social innovation incubators) and feminist associations (SOS Corps, Casa da Mulher do Nordeste, etc). Because most UPA grassroots groups are still inspired by the liberation theology, their members tend to assume responsibility to provide services to the poor and the marginalized. Female farmers associations are not exception: all appreciate the altruism and solidarity that come from their collective practice and want to improve their living conditions and environmental protection through their agricultural activities. Hence, UPA partnerships with universities that embrace civil society's needs and realities, like ongoing studies on efficacy, safety, quality and mechanisms of action of specified plant extracts in favelas and other peri-urban settings, are particularly welcomed.

By contrast, collaboration between women's groups themselves seem difficult to



establish, notably with more eccentric Quilombola communities, partly because of the

lack of financial resources required for the transport to reach them, but also because of historic entrenched racial and social discriminations. Despite an acute awareness of the importance of combating violence against women, there are not yet formal alliances between UPA female farmers and feminist organisations. Most of the actions in this regard are punctual in nature such as a training session or participation in a women's forum. One Quilombola female leader interviewed expressed the dream of setting up alliances around the issues of land rights for her people, sustainable development and protection of natural resources. In addition, she would like to implement alliances with UPA cooperatives because, in her view, these organisations promote both, creative economy and social inclusion. In her words: "What one produces and the way one produces can transform the relations of power to the work in society". In comparison, network possibilities are perceived to be greater among Indigenous communities as they are larger, better organized and enjoy a greater recognition, at least from a legal point of view.

Yet the majority of respondents deplore the lack of support from the State. A male leader from the workers union asserted that access to land, credit, technology and financial resources are at the core of UPA women demands: «When you don't have land, you don't find a quality technical assistance; thus you don't find an access to trade. Then this is one of the biggest challenges women face". Not everyone agreed with this priority however. For instance, the director of a feminist institution argued that:

"The central issue for the UPA movement is to increase the strength of those who live in this situation of being racially discriminated against (...). If you have a participation in the Forum of Women in Pernambuco, or a network of ecology, this opens the horizons, it expands our vision of the world and helps to better understand inequality,



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sexism and racism, as well as the possibilities to fight against these injustices, not only to survive them.”

Interestingly, intersectionality was seen as a major challenge by both, female farmers and leaders (male and female) of the SSE:

“Here, I would say that today we work with a critical and anti-racist feminist perspective. (But) we need to blacken this feminism. Now, regarding LGBT’s issues, there is something that bothers me deeply: here, Northeast women have not yet duly incorporated the transsexual question” (female activist from a women’s NGO).

“There is a very strong racial and macho political problem here in the state of Ceará. In particular, Black, Indian and Quilombola women experience much more difficulties to make their ventures, to enter the market than white women” (male member of a political party).

“We need to decolonize; both the university and the women’s movement. Sometimes in the name of specificity we can’t build some larger alliances. For example, some movements of workers fear losing their differences. I think that this is a great challenge for us; we need to invite people to make place to the interpenetration of multiple identities, to welcome plurality” (a female university professor).

### ***Conclusion: From Theory to Practice***

Most participants have strong conceptual knowledge of intersectionality and embrace plurality. Many believe that intersectional strategies are carried out within UPA and SSE associative movements. Yet, discriminations prevail in the SSE and no intersectional alliances are triggered or implemented. As mentioned by one black

feminist leader:

“In theory, solidarity economy is a movement, an ideology of another economy, another form of power. But in practice, this is not what we see. The majority of subjects within the SSE are men. The social division of labor prevents us from ascending within that economy. This is an economy that nobody talks about. And we still have to add the issue of



...

environmental racism: women are where in agroecology?  
We have 600

Quilombolas here in Pernambuco: how many have the land properly regularized, recognized as a quilombo settlement? ”

For the time being, women who practice UPA manage to break away from isolation and to emancipate themselves individually (power over oneself) and relational (power with). The setting up of collective projects such as the cultivation of horticultural and medicinal plants remains the cornerstone of the exercise of their land rights. If, on the other hand, the practice of UPA promotes social transformation and an improvement of life quality and health for women and their communities, it fails to enhance the economic empowerment of women farmers. Moreover, the critical positions and perspectives of black and indigenous women seem to escape the ongoing claims. Given the promises of the SSE to enhance collaborative relationships based on social justice and inclusion, the integration of intersectional perspectives appears inexorably as the next big challenge for the women of the UPA associative movement of Northeastern, Brazil. This is precisely what was discussed on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017 at a one-day restitution-finding session held at the University Federal of Pernambuco with all the participants from Pernambuco<sup>6</sup>. Also in attendance were the Minister of the Secretaria da Mulher (the equivalent of the Status of Women), a few members of her staff, and the coordinator of the Rede de Mulheres Negras (Black Women’s Network) of the state, as a way to foster common ground initiatives based on feminist values. Given the geographic distances separating the women’s farmers’ settlements from the university campus, a chartered bus service was made available to them, in order to facilitate their movements. Breakfast, diner and a small amount of money were also offered as a token of gratitude for their involvement in the project. Following a short presentation and discussion of my research findings, participants were invited to form small discussion groups (4-5 people) to address the challenges and problems of creating and





<sup>6</sup> Another session of restitution is planned for next year (2018) with Ceará's participants.

consolidating strategic alliances. They explored issues of women's privileges and oppressions, in light of sexism, transphobia, homophobia, professional issues, religious intolerance, classism and the binary rural versus urban. More specifically, they decided to debate about their multiple identities instead of just the identity of woman.

“We are black, indigenous, lesbian, transgender women. So we took a walk through these identities to understand where privileges and oppressions happen, and then other elements in regard to these oppressions and privileges, because we can't discuss in our groups only the gender issue. We need to understand what oppressions we experience in order to succeed in other initiatives”.

Another point of discussion was how to enhance their work in agroecology and phytotherapy through collective work. Recognizing that work in association is not an easy task, they highlighted the fact that they all have been formed in a culture of multiple oppressions. As stated by Marcia on behalf of the group:

“we oppress the neighbor, we oppress because we think we are better than the others: the man is better than the woman, the white woman is better than the black woman, the white woman is better than the indigenous woman, the middle-class woman is better than the poor woman, and so we are producing discrimination without realizing it”.

Among those aspects that caught their attention were the intersections of age, gender, employability, and the social origin. At the crux of the debate was the distorted way people tend to see women with farming family backgrounds. Mariinha explains “In our group, it was said that people always build caricatures, so the farmer would be the one with the cracked foot, who is not as knowledgeable and as valuable as people in other areas”.

Once asked to reflect about their existing intersectional practices, Mariinha adds that

they identified the following examples:

“When we make a mutual demand of information, when we open a public notice about credit, or we gather important information for the achievement of a right, we do it not only for the disabled person, not only for the woman, but for all of us. Our associations involve different issues that we share with each other. Still in relation to the land, there is exchange of seedlings, exchange of necessary materials. There is also access to temporary land so that people can have their sustenance, so that people can be sheltered. Then there is the understanding of history of people's lives and situations, and we talk a lot about the possibility of returning. For instance, if I deliver seedlings, if I share seeds that I grow in that land, then it can help me since mine does not produce. From our awareness it is possible to change and transform social relations. We must believe in change, we must commit ourselves to making social theory become social practice. So the role of the authorities, according to our group, is to make life easier for people, avoiding bureaucracy for what is right, looking for the humble, the elderly, the disabled, the young, and the sick with programs that serve these audiences, understand their different working conditions. We must think about the future, we can't use all the natural assets of Brazil immediately. The Brazilian economy needs to benefit people, to stop corruption for growth in the country. National products need to be consumed here, because we often only think of the products we produce have high values and we can't use them.

In conclusion, participants agreed that the restitution-findings session was a valuable venue for exchanging knowledge among themselves, as well as between them and the research team. Additionally, they committed to examine the possibility of establishing new partnerships, of strengthening existing ties between the women's groups, as well as envisioning future reciprocal visits. The session ended with an explicit



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demand to get more help to improve their communities, their environment, their “learning buildings”,

such as their schools and associations, among others. There was a clear consensus that in order to overcome financial obstacles, they need to join militant networks within the SSE, to expand their partnerships, to integrate more intersectional perspectives, and to convene with municipal, state, and even national public representatives. But, at the end of the day, it was the cry of the heart of Maria Luiza, a 62 years old woman, who got right to the core of this mixture of strength and vulnerability so characteristic of the female farmers' experiences :

“I appeal to you university students, professors, NGO's and government agents : we are without land, we ask for your help. You are that drop of water that strengthens us, you make us feel like people. We are often humiliated by society, but today we are inside a room full with all kinds of women bringing knowledge to us and among us. Because this process enriches us, we feel stronger”.

Let's hope that her cry may be finally heard.

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