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**The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and
hunger eradication, development and current challenges**

RURAL POVERTY, AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY*

by

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Firstly, I would like to thank the event organizers for this invitation and for the opportunity to participate in this high-level debate on policies for supporting rural women. In my presentation, I will comment on some of the ongoing experiences in Brazil. The aim here is to point out not only achievements that have been made but also some challenges that continue to be on the agenda from a standpoint of promoting autonomy for rural women.

It is well known that Brazil is a country of large territorial expanse. It is also a significant agricultural producer and participates in the international market as an exporter of several products. Production conditions in rural Brazil are, however, very disparate.

On the one hand, we have intensive agricultural regions where monoculture in large properties predominate and use cutting-edge technologies with high production rates; but we also have economically depressed regions with shortcomings in production structures where producer and rural women producer access – in reference to information, financing, technical assistance, and markets – is very precarious. Even in the more dynamic regions, living conditions for the population are very disparate owing to land and income concentrations. Moreover, the production model based on large properties brings grave consequences from an environmental standpoint due to the loss of biodiversity, deforestation and soil, water, food and air contamination from chemical products used in the crops. What is more, all of these fall back upon the population. Brazil is a world champion in use of chemical products in agriculture, many of them prohibited in other countries.

We live with, on the other hand, a large contingent of families that live and work in rural areas but do not have access to land. Also in these areas is a significant number of ethnic communities (indigenous, rural black communities – called “quilombos”) which fight to maintain their cultural traditions, including the production methods and marketing of their products. Disparate situations are also experienced by traditional fishing families, Amazon riverbank inhabitants (called “riberinhos”). This is also the case with many other men and women producers who combine subsistence agricultural production with market oriented activities like forest extraction, raising small animals and artisan crafts.

This group of producers who work small tracts of land based on family labor constitutes “family agriculture”. It is this category of producers which I will be referring to in this presentation. According to the 2006 Agriculture Census (IBGE), Brazilian family farming is made up of 4.3 million rural establishments (84.4% of total agricultural producers on a national level), which occupy 24.3% of the land area; are responsible for 38% of the agricultural production gross value; represent 74.4% of total rural occupations, and account for producing a majority of the staple foods consumed in the country (rice, beans, corn, poultry products, fruit, vegetables).

As for women, their reality in family farming is one of a lot of work and little recognition. Until today, Brazilian women farmers suffer from social invisibility as laborers and as citizens. Within the family, their work is considered as “giving a hand” while the man is considered the real “rural producer”; the knowledge and experience of women, mainly in reference to food production is overlooked; public representation of the family is granted to men, with the expectation that women remain restricted to the domestic world. They have less access to land and to the tools of production; it is common that they do not receive remuneration for their work, since the earnings are totaled up into the household income, whose use will be decided, a majority of the time, by the so-called “head of the household”, without the woman’s direct

participation. The majority of women do not have decision-making power regarding the aspects of production nor related to the marketing of products from the family unit. This is true even though they contribute as labor force with crops and for raising animals and above all, with activities for maintaining the family. Women farmers also suffer from a lack of civil and professional documents, without which they can get neither social nor retirement benefits. Within families, they are permanently overloaded by the accumulation of domestic chores and agricultural duties; besides this, many times they take part in additional activities to earn money, as salaried workers on other properties or they dedicate themselves to the transformation of agricultural products and to artisan crafts.

For all of these reasons, women's access to policies that support farming is made very difficult. Although the Brazilian juridical system fully recognizes equality between men and women and condemns any discrimination based on sex, within families, communities and within many institutions, a patriarchal view persists which considers the man as the head of the household. This view is reinforced by sexist institutional practices that many times are supported by legal norms and regulations, allegedly neutral, but in practice, negligent in relation to gender. This contributes to maintaining a culture of exclusion in regards to women.

Since 2003, the Brazilian federal government has been making efforts to change this situation, recognizing women farmers as subjects with rights and implementing policies to encourage their autonomy. Among these we may cite measures to facilitate the obtaining of documents, lines of financing specifically for women, differentiated technical assistance, policies that support the organization of women into productive groups as well as the marketing of their products. These measures are in answer to historic claims and to the political action of a variety of rural women's movements. Since the 1980s these movements have been conquering social visibility through marches and massive protests, communicating with unions, churches, non-governmental organizations, political parties and rural development sectors. However, until today, agents in institutions like banks, technical assistance companies, and public institutions are reluctant to recognize women farmers as direct beneficiaries to policies. This makes it difficult or even impedes that they have access to existing programs.

Given the theme of this panel, I will present here two sets of experiences that are underway in Brazil. I consider these relevant when thinking of policies to eradicate poverty that are centered on the empowerment of rural women. I will comment briefly on each of the experiences, pointing out some difficulties encountered by women seeking social recognition and also the suggestions for solutions to overcome these hurdles.

The first set of experiences is an initiative from civil society organizations. It deals with groups of women who work collectively within Agrarian Reform settlements and in rural communities, in the agro-ecological production of vegetables, fruits and processed products (cheeses, sweets, fruit juices, cookies and breads). I can cite as examples the groups "Women Determined to Win", from the Mulungunzinho settlement in the Mossoró municipality in the state of Rio Grande do Norte; the "Dandara of Palmares" Settlement Women's Collective in the Camamu municipality in the state of Bahia; and the "Agro-ecological Women Association" from the Vergel settlement in the Campinas municipality in the state of Sao Paulo; among many others spread out through various regions of the country.

These groups were formed about 10 years ago. They are an initiative taken by the women themselves, with support from unions, church sectors and non-governmental organizations. More recently, they have also garnered the support of some state policies. They are relatively small groups (with about 20 members), but, over time, they grew in size and in territorial reach. They were created with the goal of seeking out alternatives for producing food for the families and also for generating income for their members. Over time, the concern of the women in relation to the quality of food as well as the sustainability of production caused them to opt for producing ecologically, cultivating a greater variety of products in the same area, without using agro-toxins. They were pioneers in ecological production in their regions.

Women in these groups have confronted many difficulties in consolidating themselves as autonomous rural producers. Firstly, this is because the husbands did not agree that they have an separate activity which was not under the husbands' own coordination. Secondly, the women had to convince the settlement associations to cede an area of land for them to plant collectively. It must be noted that the women did not have the right to vote in association assemblies since only the lot owners could be members – in this case, the husbands. Only in 2003 was a federal norm created (Directive 981, INCRA) that establishes that all land titles in Agrarian Reform settlements must be issued in the name of the couple (men and women). Furthermore, women also confront difficulties in obtaining financing and also adequate technical assistance. What is more, the fact that they decided to produce ecologically looked to the communities like they were challenging their husbands who worked in a conventional manner (not ecologically). In some cases, the reaction of the men went beyond mere disbelief. Some tried to stop the women from going ahead with their initiatives, even reaching the point of violence in some cases.

These groups have consolidated themselves and attracted new members, expanding themselves into other municipalities. In several regions, they interact with mixed groups (made up of women and men). They have created networks of male and female producers, who are ecological, from a social-economy on a regional and national scale, and whose representatives participate in national and international events. Some groups have been able to formalize themselves and have started selling their products to institutional markets such as the School Meal Program. Today these women are respected leaders in communities where they act extensively and participate politically in forums on health, education, the environment and rural development.

Testimonials from leaders show the importance of women's collective organizations. They are an essential factor in overcoming obstacles encountered on both a family and institutional level. The organization of women's groups has favored activities geared towards teaching and training, improving the self-esteem of members and the capacity to overcome adversities such as a lack of experience in operating beyond local markets. Also, awareness of gender oppression – understanding that the hardships that they go through were not individual or just within their families – caused the women to mutually support each other, thus favoring the growth of each one inside the group. Aid from non-governmental feminist organizations as well as those sensitive to gender issues has also been pointed out as one of the fundamental factors providing support necessary for consolidating these experiences.

Secondly, I will now comment on a federal government policy for supporting the commercializing of products from smaller farmers. The policy is called the Food Acquisition Program (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos*) and was created in 2003 as part of the Zero

Hunger Program (*Programa Fome Zero*). Through this Program, the government buys food directly from family farmers (men and women) and from their organizations. The food purchased is directly donated to social institutions (hospitals, social assistance agencies, schools). Their goals are, firstly, to encourage producing foods through family farming by permitting that food be commercialized for use in institutions. Secondly, there is the goal of providing access to food in quantity, quality and regularity by populations vulnerable to food and nutritional insecurity as well as to aid in the creation of food stocks. This is at work all over the country and reaches around 100 thousand farmers annually.

The Food Acquisition Program has been positively evaluated by state agents and by the public served (producers and organizations that received foods). This is due to the following factors: it contributes to diversifying food production in family units and to improving income and family farming consumption; it helps in structuring (planning and management) the family production units and those organizations associated with them, thus serving as a stimulus to participate in new markets; it improves food in vulnerable sectors of the population as well as promoting the strengthening of networks of solidarity through interrelation related to food security policies; and it promotes local development, given that, in terms of its conception and method of execution, provides not only for the involvement of various segments of society but also for circulating financial resources within that municipality or region.

One of the Program's features that made it appealing to women is the fact that it allows for marketing products traditionally linked to the feminine sphere. Moreover, they are products cultivated in areas near their homes or in areas not used for commercial cultivation and would normally be utilized only for purposes of personal consumption. Some of these products, such as poultry, eggs, fruits and vegetables were already being sold by the women, but on a smaller scale. There are even some cases in which the Program created (or recreated) methods of distribution for traditional products that were no longer being produced due to the homogenization of modern food. This is the case for several kinds of tubers and roots that have been substituted by the potato (*Solanum tuberosum*). The Program has absorbed more than 300 different products on a national level with many regional variations. Delivery of the products may be in small quantities and with a frequency negotiated between the producers and the receiving organizations. This Program also opens up an important prospect for the sale of processed products that allows for value aggregating of family farming products. This also serves for a group of products derived from gathering that are also under the responsibility of women.

However, the formal participation of women farmers as suppliers is still very small (less than 30% of the contracts). There are several factors that contribute to this situation, the most important being: the difficulties confronted by women in order to be recognized by public agents as well as within their families as responsible for commercializing their own products; a lack of personal documentation; and the limitations of women's production organizations. It may be said that although women benefit from the Program, many times their participation is "anonymous" and subordinate. Even though the products are directly under their responsibility, the contracts are a majority of the time, made in the husband's name. This means that one more time, husbands may have control over the income received.

To what extent do these experiences help us think of policies for overcoming poverty and at the same time improving the food security of families as well as empowering rural women? There

are still historic demands from rural women that need to be remedied. They are issues like access to resources for production, changes in the sexual division of labor and social value of women. In terms of the policies that are already in place, it is necessary to create mechanisms that explicitly guarantee equal access among men and women to the opportunities and benefits generated from such policies. One of the main problems confronted by women farmers in relation to having access to these policies is, for example, the prevalent view among agents in several family farming institutions that everything is homogenous and without inner tensions. Many of the programs and policies that are directed generically to the families end up being appropriated only by men, thus making the power relationships between men and women even more out of balance. It is necessary for there to be financial, human, and institutional resources as well as the political will to continuously verify whether the existing programs are promoting or not, improvements in the lives of women farmers.

The experiences commented upon show that forming women's production groups which count on institutional support and public policies may be an important tool for empowering women. Also, these groups may help with the insertion of women into agricultural product markets, thus improving their income, their self-esteem and their access to resources and opportunities. However, the road to their full autonomy within rural families is still a long one. This also involves making changes in the space occupied by rural women not only in society but also at those moments of policy decision making.

Today, rural women's movements are also bringing attention to the structure of agricultural production and its implications on the subject of food security and sovereignty in countries. Large transnational conglomerates in the food area control the production of seeds, agro-toxins, and food distribution. This situation restricts the liberty of family farmers and at the same time puts their health and the environment at risk while also compromising the capacity of countries to implement autonomous policies. Women have been reporting that these same companies have been gradually influencing commercial practices and dependence on medicine as the only way to care of a person's health. Besides this there is, for example, the imposition on women of invasive contraceptives, synthetic hormones for menopause, in addition to measures for forcibly controlling the population – without sufficiently evaluating the risk factors involved.

At the same time, women's movements have been creating alternative experiences in the production and distribution of food such as those described here. Notably, they are based on clean and ecological technologies as well as guided by a social and feminist economy. In these experiences, the knowledge and historical contributions of women in relation to food and caring for others has been reclaimed forming a collective and emancipating standpoint.

Several women's groups, in fact, focus their attention on the production of food (*in natura* or transformed); on raising small animals; on preservation and on the adaptation of species (through seed banks or by preserving genetic material on their properties); on transmitting knowledge regarding production and the use of medicinal plants, for example. These are activities that resist the production mode based on monocultures and the intensive use of technologies and fossil fuels. These activities are not always valued socially and often considered as just "marginal activities" compared to commercial cultivations which are considered to be the "main" activities and under the responsibility of men.

Rural women's movements have been giving visibility to these questions on the one hand, valuing the concrete experiences of women in the home, in communities, in search of strengthening them as the subjects of these experiences; and even putting forth the value of healthy food as well as questions related to health and the environment as part of a more general political debate on agro-food systems. It is necessary that these movements be recognized as legitimate interlocutors of the State when developing and monitoring public policies thereby respecting the right of women to present their own proposals for society. This translates into the valorization of women as political subjects.

Thank you very much for this opportunity. I now look forward to your questions and comments.