The political participation of women in the countryside in Brazil: Reflections on forms of organisation and demands

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In Brazil, the last three decades have been marked by the growing visibility of social struggles in the countryside and the emergence of various social and political identities that have been constructed through these. The figures of the *sem terra* (landless workers), the *agricultores familiares* (family farmers), the *seringueiros* (rubber tappers), the *quilombolas*², and the *quebradeiras de coco* (coconut gatherers), amongst others, have emerged not just as the expression of conflicts but also as indicators of the existence of an enormous diversity of situations which illustrate the complexity of the social dynamics that has marked recent Brazilian history, especially in the rural environment.

The aim of this text is to present some of the traits of this process, as read through the organisational trajectory of rural women workers and the vicissitudes they face in the recognition of their political presence.

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¹ Translation from Portuguese to English by Eoin O’Neill.
² Descendents of slaves who lived in communities in different parts of Brazil and who demanded the right to the land where they lived.

Our assumption is that, as argued by Daniel Cefaï, the collective action process itself organises its environments and “simultaneously produces criteria of experience that allow the actors to guide themselves, understand what they are doing and what circumstances do to them” (Cefaï 2009, 28). From this perspective, it is a “mobile architecture of the contexts of meaning” (Cefaï 2009, 28), which calls attention to the contexts of experiences in which collective action occurs, and in which organisations are constituted and operate. As a result, we adopt as our starting point the experience of being a woman in rural contexts in Brazil as well as the contexts in which women organise, the experiences which accumulate and end up transforming them, and at the same time impress on this process the marks of previous organisational experiences.

The following reflections are not based on original empirical research, but rather on texts about women’s movements which, to some extent, have forged a determined approach to this question in Brazil. Based on our research experience with rural social movements, we will show how the organisation of women has raised new questions and produced tensions, both in the pre-existing organisational structures and in daily life.

**Antecedents: the presence of women in the struggles in the countryside**

The organisation of workers in the countryside in Brazil is not new. In the 1950s, such organisations emerged in the political scenario through resistance struggles for land from which they were threatened with expulsion, as well as through demands for better working conditions. They were *posseiros* (squatters), *foreiros*, *moradores* and *colonos* who gradually became

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3 Since the end of the 1970s, the term *movement* has been widely used by various groups to speak of certain forms of struggle, less tied to what was institutionally permitted, and to certain forms of organisation, with a distinct format from what was institutionalised (for example trade unionism). It is important not to confuse the use of this term as an empirical and substantive reference to a series of initiatives with the theoretical category of social movement.

4 A term for tenant farmer used in the sugarcane region in the Northeast of Brazil.

5 Agricultural workers who were given small plots of land to live on and raise food were called *moradores* on plantations and sugar mills and *colonos* on coffee farms.
identified as *lavradores* (agricultural laborers) or *agricultural workers*, and since the beginning of the 1960s as *peasants*. These names, most of which arose in different contexts, were the result of an ongoing organisational process and the actions of different mediators who sought to translate different occasional local demands into a more general language which would unify them (Martins 1981; Medeiros 1995; Novaes 1997). In the shaping of categories that began to be used in the political debate to designate rural workers, which in some areas were also incorporated by these people as political identities, the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), the Peasant Leagues, and, at the beginning of the 1960s, the Catholic Church, all played a central role. Women were present in these struggles, and were even in some particular and rare situations in leadership positions. An emblematic case is that of Elizabeth Teixeira, widow of João Pedro Teixeira, an important leader of the Peasant Leagues in Paraíba. Despite having participated in the organisation of peasants in her region, Elizabeth only became a recognised figure after the assassination of her husband in 1962. Following this she was invited to take his place, but she did so essentially as the widow of a leader (Mieli, Bandeira and Godoy 1997). Similarly, Josefa Pureza da Silva, wife of José Pureza da Silva, principal leader of the struggle for land in the state of Rio de Janeiro in the period before the 1964 military coup, was present in the organisational process of *posseiros* in the Baixada Fluminense region, but her participation is seldom mentioned. The same can be said of the then-wife of the principal leader of the Peasant Leagues in Pernambuco, Francisco Julião: despite intense political work, Alexina Crespo’s name receives little recognition in the relevant literature.

At the time, not only was politics a predominantly masculine universe, but the struggles were waged based on class demands, in which issues such as gender and generation did not have a place. As noted by one of those who has studied the question, in these initial moment of the constitution of rural workers as political actors,

the Church saw women as being based in the home and the family. The communists, despite encouraging women’s participation outside the home and creating women’s entities since the 1950s, such as the Brazilian Women’s Federation, considered this as something very difficult to be

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6 The story of Alexina Crespo and her children was recovered in a documentary entitled *Memórias clandestinas* (Clandestine Memories) by Maria Teresa Azevedo, completed in 2007.
made concrete, as well as being seen as secondary in relation to the centrality of the class struggle and other tasks that working class activism demanded. (Abreu e Lima 2010, 104)

As a result, despite being present in the struggles, women’s experiences principally arose out of being wives and daughters, and through the terms in which demands were publicly presented – access to land and better wages.

During the 1970s, in the context of the intense repression that followed the 1964 military coup, the trade union network was gradually built up by Contag (Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura – the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers). Contag brought together and sought to give direction to the existing trade unions, based at the municipal level, which in turn joined together in state federations. The enormous diversity of existing situations, and the fact that many trade unions emerged as a result of the stimulus of local governments and other forces linked to local powers, especially after the creation of Funrural (a governmental program that guaranteed social insurance rights and health care to rural workers), created permanent tensions in the “knots” of this network (trade unions and federations). On the one hand, the weight of local political forces tended to drag trade unions into the grasp of the different forms of consolidated domination, while on the other hand the actions of Contag sought, by demanding the enforcement of already recognised rights, to create another network of relations and to counterbalance the weight of local powers. In doing this, Contag spoke in the name of a generic category, rural workers, which covered segments of the population as diverse as employees, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, small landholders and squatters.

At the time, there were some women, albeit very few, in the presidencies of trade unions, especially in secretariats. Nevertheless, questions related to gender or specific women’s issues do not appear in the demands that emerged in the congresses and meetings held at that time. If we take as a reference important occasions such as the 3rd National Congress of Rural Workers, held in 1979, the presence of women in leadership

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7 Abreu e Lima (2010) presents data related to the participation of women in rural trade unionism in Pernambuco state in the northeast of Brazil between the 1960s and the 1980s. She calls attention to the greater presence of women in the region of the state called the Agreste, where the presence of small landholders is striking, which she claims facilitated participation in trade unions.
positions was rare, although the number of female advisors and observers was significant. These were women from another social extraction, most often with university experience and who, simply through their presence, indicated the existence of other possible social insertions for women.

This does not signify that women did not actively participate in the struggles that then emerged, since resistance to eviction from land involved all the members of the family. What is important to highlight is that the experiences of socialisation of women in politics principally occurred through trade unions, spaces where the questions considered relevant were those related to the rights of workers as a whole: agrarian reform, labour rights, and questions related to small farmers. At the time, although feminist movements had some importance and visibility in some urban segments, their concerns did not reach the countryside.

**Changes in rural trade unionism and new organisational formats and identities**

As mobilisations demanding the re-democratisation intensified in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Contag became an important national reference through the wage campaigns and strikes in the northeastern canavieiros (sugarcane cutters), as well as through their appeals for agrarian reform, and mobilisation for better prices for agricultural products. Nevertheless, its conception of the most suitable forms of action and organisation, and the unity of representation expressed in the category of rural worker, began to be tested by the outbreak of conflicts in the countryside.

In the middle of the 1970s, criticisms of Contag's trade union practices and related actions carried out in daily life by trade unions began to emerge: Contag's actions were said to be inefficient and to be principally concerned with denouncing situations of conflict to the public authorities, without stimulating the organisation and mobilisation of workers to put pressure on the state or to confront employers. Many individual trade unions were considered to be essentially welfarist and thus incapable of giving consistency to the struggle for rights demanded by the trade union confederation.

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8 Contag also represented the category that was then called *small producers*, owners of small plots of land who produced for their own consumption, for local markets and for the then emerging agro-industries.
The principal spokespeople for these criticisms came from members of the Catholic Church who were adept of Liberation Theology, and whose ecclesiastical work was disseminated throughout the country, especially in border areas, where land conflicts were more intense. In 1975, the founding of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) created the conditions for the consolidation of a powerful network of influence. Its legitimacy, inherent in its nature as an institution linked to the Catholic Church, provided theological legitimacy for the emerging demands and for actions of resistance. Through its local pastorals, it trained activists and provided space and infrastructure for meetings. It was thus fundamental for the organisations, in a period when the actual act of holding a meeting was regarded with suspicion by the military regime (Novaes 1997).

Various statements by female leaders who emerged during this period highlighted the importance of the ecclesiastical base communities in stimulating women’s meetings to deal with specific problems, especially questions related to health and social rights. The molecular work of the Church was also one of the factors most responsible for the appearance of opposition trade unions, groups that were critical not only of the then current trade union structure, but also the daily practices dominant within the trade union movement. Discussions within women’s groups became intermeshed with the organisation of these opposition groups, and made it possible in the early 1980s for various questions related to women’s rights to be raised.

Initially dispersed, the opposition trade unions joined together in new networks, especially under the banner of the so-called new trade unionism, which emerged in urban areas and whose central themes were liberty and trade union autonomy, the re-democratisation of the country, etc. In 1983, when the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT – Unified Workers’ Trade Union Federation) was created, the presence of rural opposition trade unions in the new organisation was notable, and created a new field of disputes with Contag, which was aligned with another trade union group created at that time, Conferência Nacional das Classes Trabalhadoras (Conclat – National Conference of the Working Classes). In a short space of time, a clear division was created within rural trade unionism, by the formation of a group identified in trade union circles as the rurals from CUT.

Melucci (1996), talking about social movements in complex societies, emphasises submerged networks of groups, meeting points, and circuits of solidarity, which profoundly differ from the image of the politically organ-
ised collective actor. In the cases we have studied, it seems more adequate to think that these submersed networks cannot be explained without thinking of the organisations that give them shape and sustenance in an adverse context and vice versa.

These networks of organisations proliferated in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to Church actions, local associations, non-governmental organisations and discussion groups also multiplied, which fed the incipient organisational process. Although questions related to women’s rights started to appear on the agenda, the main mobilising themes remained those of the period prior to the 1964 military coup: agrarian reform, workers' rights, social insurance, to which were now added issues related to small farmers. This social category came to have political weight within trade unionism, especially in the south of Brazil, where there was small scale production; many of those small farmers were descendents of European peasants who had come to Brazil in the 19th century and who had strong ties with markets.

One of the novelities of this period was the emergence of new subjects in the countryside struggles, which did not replace the previous ones. Those who became the best known were the *sem terra* (the landless), a social category which is the fruit of a process of pauperisation, or expropriation, of segments of workers who had previously had access to land as small landholders or tenant farmers; still the work of the Church and longstanding struggles to demand land from the state also contributed (Rosa 2010). The landless demanded land in their region of origin and refused to become involved in the colonisation projects opened during the military regime in frontier areas (Tavares dos Santos 1985; 1993), and their struggles were initially intimately linked to opposition trade unions (Esterci 1991). Slowly, they became a movement in their own right, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra (MST – Movement of Landless Rural Workers), which questioned not only trade union actions related to land holding questions, but also the organisation structure of trade unionism. MST transformed occupations and encampments into a strategy to create political facts and to see their demands met, thereby giving impetus to both expropriations and encampments (Fernandes 1996; Caldart 2000; Rosa 2010). Thus the demand for agrarian reform, which was the cement for the construction of the rural worker identity by Contag (Palmeira 1985), was gradually being socially identified with MST.
The agricultural policy of the military governments in the 1970s, which was based on the encouragement of modernisation, triggered important transformation processes. From the point of view of small farmers, they were decisive in reinforcing the political work of creating identification with the world of work and unleashing a series of struggles demanding better conditions of insertion in the productive process.

In relation to employees, at the beginning of the 1980s, in the northeast and southeast of the country, there were a number of important strikes by cortadores de cana (sugarcane cutters), placing once again on the political agenda the issue of working conditions, now in modernised agriculture. In the north of Brazil, where there were native rubber tree groves, segments struggling against the expropriation process were constituted as seringueiros (rubber tappers) and little by little fused their struggle to remain on the land with environmental questions.

A large part of these mobilisations involved themes related to living conditions, but also to the forms of organisation, which in different regions of the country were intimately related to the opposition trade unions, without however altering the basic identity of these segments as workers. This is not a mere detail. The emphasis on belonging to the world of work was fundamental for the political adaptation of experiences of struggle and for the definition of adversaries and allies. The new demands and organisational experiments (restructuring of trade unions; creation of trade unions for specific sectors, such as pig-rearing, poultry and tobacco growing unions; associations; formation of productive groups; the appearance of organisations self-styled as movements, etc.) resulting from the attempt to confront some of their immediate problems, especially those related to access to land, production and commercialisation, emerged under the aegis of their identification with the world of work. The same can be said about the first women’s organisations.

Nevertheless, this fact did not prevent the occurrence of tensions within organisational experiences, to the extent that Contag always exhorted the “class union” and highlighted the risks of “divisionism” and the fragmentation of workers interests and struggles. In effect, this set of changes profoundly affected the rural trade unionism led by Contag. Despite claims of unity by the world of labour, a clear differentiation of categories took place, as each came to gain their own identity and to constitute themselves as differentiated actors in the political scenario. It occurred like an implosion of the category of rural worker which had
been constituted in the 1970s, accompanied by various organisational possibilities that broke with the unified representation tradition of rural trade unionism (Medeiros 2001). In this process, Contag lost its monopoly of speaking for rural workers, having to dispute their representation with other organisations, both trade unions – such as the Federation of Rural Employers of the State of São Paulo (Feraesp) and the Federation of Workers in Family Farming in Santa Catarina (Fetrafesc) at the state level, and in the 2000s the Southern Federation of Workers in Family Farming and the Federation of Workers in Family Farming of Brazil – and non-union (MST), as well as CUT. The constitution of rural women’s organisations is part of this process.

The emergence of rural women’s organisations

In a context of greater visibility of struggles in the countryside and in the cities, the broader political reopening and the ensuing reorganisation of political parties, the theme of social class dominated the political scenario in the early 1980s. Although feminist organisations were already present and raised questions such as male domination, sexuality, women’s right to control over their bodies, their actions were more significant in urban areas and, even in these, they were not central to the struggle for the democratisation of the country which led to the end of the military regime.

In the rural environment, women were far from having the basic rights of citizenship. Indeed, often they did not even have basic documents (identity card, voting card, and in some situations not even a birth certificate), since these were not needed in their daily lives.

In the alternatives that then began to be delineated, the action of advisors and organisations were fundamental. These encouraged the raising of awareness amongst women of the importance of political participation in trade unions or movements and the preparation of their demands and the

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9 Despite Contag’s affiliation to CUT in the middle of the 1990s various federations and trade unions did not accompany this adhesion, resulting in the persistence of tensions within rural trade unions between cutistas (supporters of CUT), heirs of the proposals of opposition trade unions and those who opposed CUT. Evidently these dichotomies reduce the complexity of the political disputes within rural trade unionism. Nevertheless, they were the visible form of the debate through which a large part of the leaderships identified themselves and created their political relations.
perception of the limits and potentials of different types of organisations. Reports such as those of Luci Choinaki (Paulilo and Silva 2010) or studies such as those of Sales (2007) or Schaaf (2003), amongst others, show the important role played by the Church through its pastoral activities, which prepared women to speak in public and to discuss their problems, promoting the consciousness of women in relation to political participation.

The first movements that called themselves women’s movements in the countryside emerged from two different directions: the demand for access to social insurance rights in the south of Brazil and the possibility of working in emergency programs to combat the effects of drought in the Northeastern sertão. Both emerged within trade union structures and struggles, but brought new issues to these and over time, as we shall see, surpassed them.

Access to social insurance was an issue which mobilised farmers from family-based farming in the south of the country, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although rural workers had had a right to pensions since 1971, they only received the equivalent of half a minimum salary (in other words, half of the level which urban workers were entitled to). In the situation of family farmers, only male heads of families were recognised as workers and could receive this pension. In the case of the death of this person, the widow’s pension was equivalent to 70% of the amount previously received (Brumer 2002; Barbosa 2010).

From the late 1970s, especially in Rio Grande do Sul, and in Santa Catarina shortly afterwards, events began to take place which brought to the public sphere the demand for the equalisation of the social insurance rights of rural workers with those of urban workers and the extension of these rights to women, which implied their recognition as workers. This question was debated in the Third National Congress of Rural Workers, held by Contag in May 1979. Questions related to health were also on the agenda, since employees had the right to hospital care but not small farmers, who were obliged to pay.

In the case of the Northeastern sertão, women mobilised to demand the right to be enlisted in emergency work groups, which until then had only offered work to men (Abreu e Lima 2003; Bordalo 2009). In 1979

\[10\] Emergency work groups consisted of actions carried out by the federal or state government during droughts in the Northeast to provide income to the impacted populations. They involve working on roads, the construction of dams, etc.
and 1980, the region suffered a serious drought; according to Contag (1980, 18) various mobilisations, public acts and meetings were held to demand that the beneficiaries of the Emergency Plans be rural workers and not large landholders. In 1979 it stated, “many workers were left out of the plans. Women, girls and youths were also left out... Only male heads of families were enlisted...” (Contag 1980, 16). Once they were incorporated in the work groups, women, according to Abreu e Lima (2010), wanted to form distinct groups from men, to establish themselves as workers.

These two events, in distant regions but close in time, were important for the diffusion of the perception that what women needed, more than anything, was to be recognised as rural workers in order to gain access to social insurance benefits (retirement, maternity leave, health leave, etc., to have the possibility of enlisting in work groups and to have access to land. According to the authors who deal with this question, demanding this recognition also involved questioning the invisibility of the work carried out by women (Bordalo 2009; Heredia and Cintrão 2006) and demanding the right to join trade unions.\footnote{Although there was no legal prohibition of this, many trade unions saw women as dependents of their husbands or parents, and for this reason discouraged their affiliation. Nevertheless, it is important to call attention to the fact that this difficulty with the unionisation of women cannot be seen as a general norm for Brazil. While in the reports about the origin of MMA this issue constantly arises, it is important to bear in mind that in other regions of the country, such as the Northeast, women held leadership positions in trade unions. This is the case of Margarida Maria Alves, assassinated in 1983 because of her actions at the head of the Rural Workers Trade Union in Alagoa Grande, Paraíba.}

From the perspective that we want to highlight in this article, it is necessary to bear in mind that these mobilisations took place in a scenario of relationships that were constructed and made feasible through trade union networks, both the one linked to Contag’s official line and the one constructed by the opposition trade unions. This was the place for meeting and for publicising demands. In other words, the trade union created it as a space where women could meet, while it equated a determined perception of the problems that affected them, thus creating conditions for their questions to leave the domestic sphere and to become public concerns. However, this space was not neutral; coming from within trade unionism, it took a certain approach to the theme,
which argued that the rights of women should be discussed in a form linked to the agenda based on workers’ rights (land, better wages, agricultural policies, social insurance rights, etc.). At the same time, for women it raised the question of the lack of visibility that these questions had on trade unions’ agendas, where health, sexuality and relations of power within the domestic space were secondary to subjects that constituted the tradition within rural struggles. In this way, tension began to emerge between the organisation within trade unionism and the construction of women’s own movement.

The question of the recognition of women’s work appeared very clearly at the Fourth National Congress of Rural Workers, held by Contag in 1985. Here, the women from the Central Sertão of Pernambuco presented the “Proposal to increase the participation of us, rural women, in our trade union movement” (Abreu e Lima 2010). Nevertheless, as the same author shows, gender relations were not discussed: “[T]his formulation was recent and had not yet reached the trade union or popular movements. Discrimination and the specific struggles of women were treated as ‘women’s questions’, a further struggle for them to undertake” (Abreu e Lima 2010, 113).

To summarise, the 1980s proved to be a prodigious time in the creation of women’s organisations in different parts of the country12, as well as specialised secretariats, initially in rural trade unions linked to CUT, and later in all rural workers trade unions. A new actor began to be created, which little by little began to solidify its own agenda – which nevertheless did not substitute itself to the one implemented by trade unionism (whether that linked to Contag’s hegemonic line, or to the opposition trade unions affiliated to CUT).

Women, rural trade unionism and MST

During the National Constituent Assembly (ANC), women’s participation increased and mobilisations intensified, with the support of Contag, CUT, National and State Councils of Women’s Rights and international cooperation agencies. As highlighted by Heredia and Cintrão (2006), between 1986 and 1988 numerous manifestations were held (marches, public demonstrations) which aimed at increasing popular participation and influencing debates. These mobilisations, as well as the lobbying of ANC, resulted in a significant expansion of rights: parity for rural and urban social insurance, retirement pensions for rural women from the family farming sector, the right to joint ownership of the land, sick leave and maternity leave (Siliprandi 2009). There was an expansion in the range of demands, with land ownership gaining greater weight, as it was something that could directly affect the assets of small landholders and rural settlers, who began to gain significance due to the agrarian reform policy that began with the New Republic. As well as giving visibility to a set demands, it cannot be forgotten that the manifestations had their own effects and tended to produce or reinforce the groups, making them visible to themselves: they transformed settlements of individuals which had social characteristics in common, which were often ignored as this, into groups that had real existence; for this reason they could contribute to making groups exist through the collective actions that engendered them and through the feeling of being part of larger collectivities that they had created (Champagne 1998, 239).

In 1988, under the influence of the mobilisations of the Constituent Assembly, Contag held its First National Meeting of Women Rural Workers. This triggered the organisation of women within rural worker trade unionism, thereby allowing a great geographic expansion of women’s demands, due to the capillary presence of trade unions in all Brazilian states and an enormous number of municipalities (Heredia and Cintrão 2006, 7). These processes resulted in a progressive increase in the presence of women in trade unionism, reflected in a rise in their participation, both in trade union leaderships and in national congresses. In the Fifth Contag Congress, held in 1991, women accounted for approximately 10% of delegates, and for the first time a woman was elected to the Directorate of the Confederation. In 1998, the First National Plenary of Women in Trade Union Movement was held, leading to the strengthening of the
proposals related to women to be presented to the Seventh Contag Congress, which came to be called the “National Congress of Male and Female Rural Workers”. In this congress, held in 1998, a policy of quotas in trade union directorates was approved (30% of women in all levels of the trade union movement)\(^\text{13}\). To a great extent, the debate reflected the discussions of the CUT/Contag Trade Union Formation Project (CUT/Contag 1998), which was at the heart of a sustainable rural development project for rural trade unionism. In the following congress, held in 2001, women accounted for almost 40% of delegates and their participation in the directorates of state trade union federations was very visible (Heredia and Cintrão 2006).

One of the results of the growing organisation of women and the expansion of their demands was the *Marcha das Margaridas*, influenced by the World March of Women\(^\text{14}\). This involved a process of organising and mobilising rural women workers, which culminated in a large march in Brasília. The first march was held in 2000, and was modeled on the Gritos da Terra (Cries of the Earth)\(^\text{15}\). It was organised by women affiliated to Contag and brought more than ten thousand women to Brasília with the slogan “Against hunger, poverty and sexist violence”. In 2003, it was held a

\(^{13}\) The debate about quotas as a way of opening space for the participation of women took place not just in rural trade unionism, but also within the Workers’ Party (PT).

\(^{14}\) The march was named after Margarida Maria Alves, a trade union leader from the state of Paraíba assassinated in 1983 due to her involvement in the defense of workers’ interests. The World March of Women is an international social feminist movement, whose principal concerns are the struggle against poverty and sexist violence.

\(^{15}\) Gritos da Terra Brasil (Cries of the Earth) began to be organised in the 1990s by Contag, with the aim of calling attention of the public and those in power to the demands of rural workers. It involved bringing to a national stage events that had begun in Pará, with great political repercussion. They translated a set of demands of differentiated categories into a nationally unified agenda, mobilising workers from various points of the country. It is an important moment for the presentation and negotiation of demands with the state. Trade unionists see the force of the Gritos as being responsible for a series of measures understood as being of interest to farmers, such as Pronaf (National Support Program for Family Farming), increased funding for Procera (Special Credit Program for Agrarian Reform), greater agility in the granting of pensions (CUT/Contag 1998). Some of these events were organised with the participation of MST, others were not.
second time and around 40,000 women from all over the country participated – which made it one of the largest manifestations of women at a national level. A new march was held in 2007. During these events a list of demands were given to the President of the Republic and a cycle of negotiations with the government started. Notwithstanding the inclusion of a series of rights in the Constitution, it was the constant pressure for the effective implementation of these rights which led to political action.

These events were not, however, just directed at the state: they can be read as exercises in the diffusion of values and conceptions, as an educational practice that is slowly propagated, resulting in workers identifying themselves with the cause and getting to know their rights, and in this way constituting themselves as a group (Champagne 1998). This dimension can only be learned through the observation of the preparatory process for the event, the local meetings, the molecular process for the production of adhesion and engagement. It is during these moments that the key demands reveal their strength, questioning the places traditionally established for men and women in family relationships and in the different dimensions of their daily lives (Medeiros 2007). At the same time, it is in activities such as these that women see themselves as a cohesive group with a set of demands.

As for the MST, since its origin this organisation has stimulated the presence of women, but has only partially accompanied the principal demands of trade unionism. According to Gonçalves (2009, 200), in September 1989 the first version of the Normas Gerais do MST (General Norms of MST) contained a chapter on the “articulation of women”, stressing “the struggle against all forms of discrimination and against machismo”, as well as calling attention to the need to “organise a commission of women at the national level, responsible for policies proposed for the movement.” Shortly after this, the National MST Women’s Collective began to be organised. According to Deere (2004), the 1993 Documento Básico (Basic Document) determined that the Movement should “consider specific women’s questions and their participation as an integral part of the demands and of the organisation, treating them as class based and not gender.” Nevertheless, the same author called attention to the fact that article 152 of this document repeated that the Movement’s objective was to encourage the role of women in production and their participation in cooperatives, and that it was also necessary to “fight against inequality and the traditionalism that exists among the peasants”. In the case of
access to land, the debate about land titles was not relevant since in the late 1980s, MST was involved in an effort to collectively organise settlements. It was only much later, after it had been found that the collectivising experiences had failed, that the question returned to the agenda. According to Deere (2004) it was only in 1996, when the National Women’s Collective was formally created, that MST took on the right of women to land as a basic demand. For Gonçalves (2009), the First Meeting of Women Rural Workers in 1995 was decisive for this.

In 2000, the first documents written by the National Gender Collective appeared, indicating a change in the ways in which the question was understood. Three years later, the first documents written by the Gender Sector appeared (Gonçalves 2009). This represented the entrance of the question into the basic organisational structure of MST. However, as noted by Gonçalves (2009), this innovation raised questions within MST, especially regarding relations between gender, class and politics. The tension between gender and class has been part of the debate during recent decades and is always mentioned by leaders in their statements. In a similar manner to what happened in trade unionism, gender issues only got onto the agenda very slowly. At least this is what the literature tends to show: although the encampments and occupations were spaces in which men, women and children participated, and although the importance of women was always mentioned, during the daily routine, the weight of tradition came into play, imposing difficulties on women, both in relation to the division of political activities with men and the devalorisation of questions seen as being “women’s questions”. Similarly, the prevalence of domestic arrangements which maintain traditional practices in land inheritance are common despite the equality of men and women’s rights being guaranteed by law.

Referring to trade union practices, Torrens states that they did not try in the same way to increase the potential of their capacity to reconstruct interpersonal relationships and to interfere in a more general sense in changes in cultural patterns. Among the cultural transformations, what needs to be highlighted is the importance of breaking away from current standards of subordination and discrimination (in relation to gender, generation, race, sexual option, ethnicity, etc.) and the constitution of new and equitable social relations (Torrens 2005, 105).

In relation to MST, the creation of a gender sector provoked intense internal debates, and its relevance was questioned. As highlighted by
Renata Gonçalves, resorting to the concept of gender became a need even because of the manner in which the debate was introduced within MST: women’s collectives, which marked the discussion of so-called “specific” questions, gave rise to gender collectives which in turn led to the emergence of the gender sectors, indicating an alteration of objectives, and put in evidence the anxiety to move the discussion beyond the frontiers of gender, overrunning the machista trenches which resisted (and resist!) within the Movement (Gonçalves 2009, 214).

The constitution of autonomous movements

At the same time that the question of gender relations penetrated the debate both within rural trade unionism (in its various different types) and in MST and other organisations, one could also observe the formation of women’s autonomous movements. As has already been mentioned, since the 1980s, especially in the south of Brazil, many rural women workers’ movements have emerged. This decade saw the emergence of the MMA (Movement of Women Farmers) in Santa Catarina, the Movement of Rural Women Workers of Rio Grande do Sul (MMTR-RS) and various others, culminating with the creation in 1995 of the National Articulation of Rural Women Workers.

Although the origin of these organisations was linked to the struggle of opposition trade unions to influence the political approaches of trade unionism, or to the struggles waged by MST (Paulilo 2003), questions specifically related to gender were raised from the beginning. Participating in trade union activities or in MST, women left domestic spaces and began to perceive the existence of new possibilities of engagement and discussion. However, they also began to be influenced by new questions, raised by feminist movements, which had repercussions on existing organisations. Participation in itself, even when incipient, made the tensions inherent in women’s lives more evident, since the strong social control exercised on them by their husbands and parents surfaced. Women also faced the criticism of family members and neighbours regarding certain attitudes considered inappropriate, such as going out alone without the company of husbands, parents or brothers; going to meetings; travelling; participating in debates. At the same time, practical questions arose related to childcare, daily domestic tasks and work on landholdings that were particular to women. Women’s entrance into political activities
required a new division of domestic work, which was not done without some difficulties. These tensions in daily life were propelled to the public sphere by reflections on the condition of women and by the need to bring them into public debate.

In recent years, these movements expanded, imposing their questions on the agendas of trade unions and other movements, through the simple effect of the competition imposed around demands. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it had become impossible to think of sets of political demands in which the question of women’s rights and gender were not present.

Similarly, due to their political proximities and alliances constructed over time, women’s movements were not forged independently of the political disputes that cut across rural worker organisations, or of the hierarchical questions which were constituted over a number of years. A particularly important example is the fact that in 2004, autonomous movements, mostly politically articulated around the general aims of MST, began a process of approximation with La Via Campesina International peasant Mouvement, in which MST, the Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens (MAB - Movement of People Affected by Dams), and the Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (MPA - Small Farmers’ Movement), amongst others, were already participating.

As a result, the Peasant Women’s Movement (MMC) emerged, following a split with MMTR. This organisation saw itself as a peasant and feminist social movement. Its proposals included the discussion of the relations between the class struggle and gender, bringing the feminist debate into issues seen as general and into more traditional demands, such as agrarian reform or the questioning of the economic model (Jalil 2009). In the 2000s, the MST saw a progressive shift in its positions, as it increasingly affirmed that the struggle for land was not enough in itself, but rather had to be articulated with the struggle against agribusiness. This, along with the articulations around Via Campesina, and the emergence of MMC, placed a new question on the agenda of demands and mobilisations, which was rapidly incorporated by women: the struggle for food sovereignty and for healthy foods, reinforcing their peasant identity and more clearly incorporating a feminist discourse (Paulilo 2009; Jalil 2009). In its presentation on its website, MMC stated its central struggle as being against the capitalist and patriarchal model and in favour of the construction of a new society with equality of rights. “We assume the Peasant Ecological Agriculture Campaign
as our principal fight with a feminist practice based on the defence of life, the changing of human and social relations and the conquering of rights.”

Since 2004, women in the MMC have carried out various mobilisations related to this issue. Among these the destruction of eucalyptus shoots in an Aracruz nursery in Rio Grande do Sul (2006), at the same time that the FAO Seminar on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development was being held in the state capital. More recently it launched the National Campaign for the Production of Healthy Food, with the slogan “Produce healthy food, take care of life and nature!” According to Paulilo (2009), what distinguishes MMC from the other movements is precisely this emphasis on questions considered to be domestic, both by trade unionism and by MST:

This emphasis is reflected both in the form of internal organisation, which is less hierarchical, less institutionalised and more sexist, and in the character of its public manifestation, made less in the name of a “class” and more in function of what directly affects rural women on a daily basis. (Paulilo 2009, 197)

Also according to this author, this fact is of great importance, since it points to the politicisation of daily life and the radicalisation of the posture of women:

It is the concern with health and alimentation of the family that is leading MMC to making radical postures, some public (and very “publicized”) against hybrid seeds, genetically modified foods, agro-toxins and reforestation. (Paulilo 2009, 198)

During the 1990s many other rural women’s organisations emerged, based on specific questions and identities, such as the National Council of Indigenous Women, the Fisherwoman’s Association, the Secretariat of Rural Women Extractive Workers (linked to the National Council of Rubber Tappers), the organisation of Quilombola Women, and the Babaçu Movement of Coconut Breakers, an inter-state organisation whose principal demand is free access to the babaçu forests. The Movement of Rural Women Workers of the Northeast also has strong ties with rural trade unionism. It originated in a women’s organisation from the central sertão of Pernambuco; although it had many points in common in terms of the defense of women’s rights, it did not align itself politically with Via Campesina.

16 www.mmcbrasil.com.br
In all these organisations questions of gender mixed in a specific manner with pre-existing organisational traditions.

**Issues and demands**

As has already been mentioned, women's mobilisations initially focused on certain issues which implied their recognition as workers, and overcoming what several women's representative bodies called the invisibility of their work, generally considered as help. This recognition was fundamental in the consolidation of the demand for social insurance rights and for joint ownership of the land. Another important type of recognition was the possibility of trade union affiliation, and after 1998 the establishment of quotas in trade union directorates. These aspects were central for the raising of specific women's issues within trade unionism (in its various political versions) and came to be part of their demands. Nevertheless, many of these could not be fully carried through, due to women’s lack of documentation. As a result, the National Articulation of Rural Women Workers launched a national campaign in 1997, using the slogan “Having documents is a right.” Women linked to MST also participated (Deere 2004; Cordeiro 2007). This campaign was adopted by the Brazilian state in 2004, in the Ministry of Agrarian Development’s Program for the promotion of equality in gender, race and ethnicity.

Nevertheless, as highlighted by Torrens, based on research carried out by Deser (Department of Rural Trade Union Studies), a non-governmental organisation which assists CUT affiliated trade union in the south of Brazil, during the work carried out by the campaign, the local coordinators faced enormous difficulties in placing these priority activities on trade union’s agendas. As a result, it was found that, principally from the second year of the campaign onwards, many of the planned activities had not been implemented in most of the municipalities involved in this work. This especially prejudiced the objective and results traced by the Regional Coordination. In practice, despite all the attempts to reorient the actions of the campaign, the effects and impacts related to the expansion of access opportunities of women farmers to social, economic and political rights were very limited (Torrens 2005, 100).

The same author emphasises that the southern trade unions lacked work that valorised the participation of women farmers in decision making spaces and not just as labour in these production processes. This perhaps
can be attributed to the presence of a conception that gives greater emphasis to actions in the economic field than to ones that emphasise the construction of citizenship or the winning of social rights (Torrens 2005, 102).

Despite these difficulties, due to the pressure of women over recent decades, legislation was enacted for constitutional rights which required special norms to be implemented (as in the case of maternity benefit, in 1994), credit policies for women farmers were implemented (Pronaf Mulher, 2003), and stimuli for the productive organisation of rural women were created, in order to generate income and thus give them greater autonomy in relation to the use of money (Bruno et al. 2010). In addition, a Gender Work Group was established in the Mercosul Specialised Meeting on Family Agriculture. All of these are important indications that the question has been gaining space on the political agenda and is being incorporated in governmental public policies.

Nevertheless, perhaps what has most mobilised women has been the right to land, something that arose out of the intensification of the creation of rural settlements. It was proposed on the one hand that the land titles which were to be distributed should be issued in the name of the couple, irrespective of the marital status of the beneficiary; and on the other hand, that the rights to the land of women heads of families (widows, separated women, single mothers) be recognised, and that they be entitled to receive assistance created to help settled families, such as installation assistance, housing, credit, etc. According to Deere (2004), this demand was most persistently articulated by women linked to Contag and became an object of intense discussion in the First National Seminar of Rural Women Workers in 1988\(^\text{17}\). As has already been mentioned, only later was this incorporated by MST.

**Conclusion**

During the last 30 years, the struggles of Brazilian rural women have been marked by a strong interface with the more general struggles of rural workers. Initially related to more specific issues (social insurance rights, health, access to land) the agenda gradually expanded, at the same time as

\(^{17}\) A possible hypothesis for this is the fact that male migration in search of work in other regions is very common, especially in the poorest parts of the country. In these cases women assume responsibility for the family, but without the corresponding rights to such social position.
local movements multiplied, accompanying the general tendencies of rural struggles in Brazil. Starting from struggles to extend the rights that male urban workers already enjoyed to the countryside and to women, rural workers gradually came to question the agriculture model, placing on the agenda issues such as the defence of agro-ecological production, food sovereignty and criticism of agribusiness.

The gender agenda was intimately related to the agenda of very different movements, accompanying their diversity, alignments, conflicts and tensions. This gave it a new shape, to the extent that it articulated gender and class. However, this was done through prior political alignments that were reflected even in the construction of the nomenclature, as in the case of the opposition between workers and peasants or even family farmers and peasants. As noted by Bordalo (2006), it also indicated differentiated forms of action and opposition between distinct forms political cultures, involving regions that have been at the head of this organisational process (the South and the Northeast).

These developments triggered new disputes, but also allowed, considering the competitive field in which they occur, for issues to circulate from one agenda to another.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that recognition in itself does not guarantee the implementation of rights. Cases where they clash with custom are not rare, meaning that the analysis has to deal with various spheres simultaneously: that of the public discourse of leaderships, that of mobilised women and that of daily practices and the way that these spheres are interrelated and produce new conflicts, which range from the domestic sphere to the conditions of food production.

References


