
Changes in family life: Observations on eucalyptus and women in Mato Grosso do Sul

“It is the rural women’s movements that have been at the forefront of massive public actions aimed at fighting back against the big corporations in the agri-food sector (pharmaceutical laboratories that produce transgenic seeds and toxic agrochemicals) and defending biodiversity.” (SILIPRANDI, 2013, p. 239)

Numerous events reflect the growing protagonism of women in the economy and, more recently, in political debate. In Brazil, one of the most visible examples of this political struggle was the action undertaken by the Peasant Women’s Movement (MMC), a member organization of La Via Campesina, in 2006, when close to 2,000 women occupied the Aracruz Celulose eucalyptus seedling production laboratories in Rio Grande do Sul. The aim of this action was to denounce the expansion of the “green desert” created by industrial eucalyptus plantations and the resulting expulsion of peasant communities. It was an act in defence of peasant agriculture as a promoter of biodiversity and foundation of food sovereignty. In this way, these women defended seeds for life, in the sense that “seeds are the beginning and the end of peasant farming production cycles. They are a collective creation that reflects the history of peoples and their women, who have always been their creators and the ones primarily responsible for their protection and improvement” (Martins; Stedile, 2011).

However, the defence of seeds for life and the fight against agribusiness, and especially pulp-production agribusiness, is a complex challenge, because it is interconnected with issues of autonomy and subalternity. In the eastern region of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, women have devoted less time to the protection of seeds and more to employment in the pulp industry – particularly because in this region, almost no space has been opened for the oppressed, except for those spaces that have been forged through struggle.

Figures from the 2011 Fibria Sustainability Report indicate that there were 897 direct employees of the company in the Três Lagoas Unit in the state of Mato Grosso, of whom 90 were women. This means that women accounted for 10.03% of the total workforce employed by this unit in industrial and forestry activities, which is slightly below the average percentage of women in the workforce employed by Fibria as a whole, which is 12.73%.

Direct employment by Fibria in Brazil 2009 to 2011

	Total number of workers	Women workers	% of women
2009	4749	675	14,21
2010	5037	726	14,41
2011	4006	510	12,73

Source: Fibria – Sustainability Report (2011)

It should be stressed that approximately 80% of the female workforce employed by the pulp and paper company works in the nurseries where the eucalyptus seedlings are produced. According to the company, since this is an activity that requires extreme care in the handling of the seedlings, women are ideally suited to it because of their delicacy and patience: they are the guardians of the cloned eucalyptus seedlings. This seems to be the secret for obtaining good results in the production of seedlings: exploiting the subjective concept of femininity.

Figures from the Três Lagoas Unit also reveal another issue: the limited participation of the female workforce in the industrial sector and forestry sector of Fibria's operations. Women are assigned to specific tasks. However, due to the prevalence of outsourcing in this industry – according to the same report, the total number of outsourced workers is 2,590, much higher than the number of workers directly employed by Fibria – the female workforce in the eucalyptus-pulp complex is also largely employed through outsourcing, mainly because these are the companies where the workers in the forestry sector are employed (in planting, cultivation and harvesting).

It should be stressed that most of these subcontractor companies come to Três Lagoas during the periods of planting, ant control and debudding, and then move on to other places. The result is a proliferation of temporary and precarious work contracts, for periods of just over a year, according to the testimony of women in the district of Arapuá in the municipality of Três Lagoas. The women who are hired are from the rural community of Arapuá and the rural settlements close to the eucalyptus plantation zones. They work in this activity because “there is no other option”, “there is no other work”, “you either work for the companies or you stay unemployed”. They say that before the arrival of the companies, the only work available was as domestic workers in the city of Três Lagoas or the housework in their families' homes – some of them lived on ranches where their husbands worked for pay.

When asked if they are satisfied with their current employment situation, they generally say no, because of a perception of exploitation. They say that it is “very demanding work”. They carry out work like hoeing, ploughing, manual planting, weeding, applying fertilizer, debudding with sickles, and ant control. For the latter, they carry 20-litre sprayers on their backs. One of the women reported that she worked with a sickle for two companies and her hands became so badly blistered that they bled, even if she wore the gloves provided by the company.

Another aspect that emerges from the testimony of these women is the fact that they have a set time to go to work, but not to return home. They leave at around 4:30 am and return at 6:00 pm – unless the bus breaks down, which is quite common. Combined with these extremely long work hours are the bad food and possibility of snake bites. To prevent the latter, the company recommends that they avoid sitting on the ground, and so when they reach the end of a row they must rest standing up – but this is a privilege reserved for the fastest workers who manage to get there first.

There are dramatic stories which involve entire families. This is the case of a woman who worked on the eucalyptus plantations and now suffers from depression. She was given a few days of sick leave, but she is currently unemployed because when she went back to work, the company laid her off. Her husband is also unemployed; he was laid off when the company Urenha went bankrupt. Aside from not receiving severance pay, he was also not given the medical check-up he should have received at the end of his employment. When he applied to work at another company, he discovered, through the check-up required for hiring, that he had back and heart problems, and was therefore deemed unfit for the job. Because he was not given a medical check-up at the time he was laid off, he was unable to prove that his back problems were a consequence of the work he had done for close to 20 years.

Work in this sector also imposes changes in women's relationships with their children and even with their children's schools. A woman who has lived for more than 20 years in the community of Arapuá described how the arrival of the plantation companies changed school routines as a result of the pace of work. In her words:

The women are working. In fact, our political struggle here is about our need for a daycare centre. Because there are mothers who have two or three small children and they end up leaving them with their grandmothers to go to work. One of them has two children, one is in kindergarten and the other doesn't go to school yet, and she has to leave them with the grandmother so she can go to work. Because the father works, the mother works, and they have no one to leave them with. That's what happens. When there is a school meeting nobody goes, because the mothers are working and they can't take days off work. It's still like that. (Resident of the district of Arapuá, interviewed on February 11, 2014 by Mieceslau Kudlavicz)

We want to emphasize that these observations on the situation of women resulting from eucalyptus plantations are not intended to portray them as victims. Rather, they are aimed at trying to understand and document the contradictory process of capital generated by control of the means of production, the exploitation of female labour, and the imposition of the market society. This is a situation that leads to social inequalities and to phenomena that range from submission to the uprising of the working class as a political subject with the right to choose. It is our hope that rebellion will arrive soon in the countryside of Mato Grosso do Sul!

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