

Gender and food systems: between idealization and denial

Fairouz Gazdallah and Barbara Van Dyck

Rural women have a very high profile in the projects and programs of the Belgian Ministry of Development Cooperation. The ministry, along with numerous international organizations, thereby helps to create an imagined role for women in agriculture in the Global South. The representation and discourse on the empowerment of rural women may sound promising – in a sense, feminist. But how progressive is this so-called feminist vision? And do we apply the same standards to the imagined role and rights of women farmers and women farm workers in Flanders and Europe?

There is a great deal of literature and data on the obstacles and socio-cultural context of women farmers and women farm workers in the Global South. By contrast, policy and research barely mention the reality by women's lives on European farms, and how a feminist agenda there could contribute to more equitable and ecologically sustainable food systems. How do we explain this emphasis on gender in the intervention countries of Belgian development cooperation, and the apparent neglect of gender in Flemish agricultural policy? At a time when the UN is hosting a food summit to 'transform' global food systems¹ and the Flemish government is working on a food strategy, we ask ourselves how we, as feminist and ecological allies, can mobilize to assert the rights of women farmers worldwide and make their voices heard. Beyond the buzzword of 'gender mainstreaming', various forms of ecological feminism can be used as a framework to transform food systems agroecologically and undo structural injustices.

Different forms of ecological feminism

To examine the gender approach of the Flemish Agricultural Policy Documents and the Belgian Strategic Paper on 'Agriculture and Food Security', we drew inspiration from feminist eco-activists and thinkers. Despite the differences in emphasis between the different traditions of political-ecological feminism, ecofeminists such as Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant and Wangari Maathai; postcolonial feminists such as Silvia Cusicanqui and Berta Cáceres; and ecological thinkers from the African-American / Black feminist tradition such as bell hooks² and Chelsea Frazier, all work at the intersection of gender, race, and economic and ecological justice. These women stress that everything is connected (nature and culture in particular) and highlight the importance of language and conceptual frameworks in society. They share a commitment to the health and sustainability of all people and their living environments, regardless of gender, race, class, age and sexual orientation. It is true that the above-mentioned feminists use rather awkward expressions such as 'colonial capitalist patriarchy' and 'imperialist capitalist patriarchy' to describe the intersections of the different systems of domination that characterize modern contemporary societies.

However, as bell hooks argues, these expressions are useful because they do not prioritize one system over another but rather provide a way of thinking about the interlocking systems of oppression that work together to maintain the status quo.³

That such forms of exploitation overlap is hardly surprising when we look at contemporary globalized food systems and the damage they do. The destruction of local cultures, the disappearance of peasant agriculture, declining biodiversity, climate change and an increase in food-related diseases have all been linked to the industrialization and globalization of food systems.⁴ Their existence is largely dependent on underpaid or free work and the uncontrolled extraction of so-called raw materials. You just have to think of the slave plantations in the European colonies, which laid the foundations for today's organization of food supply. The destruction of soils through intensive agriculture based on growing only a handful of crops; the massive use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers; and the diversion of land, seeds and financial resources, as well as miserable working conditions for male and female farm workers – are all an extension of this. In other words, the economic wealth and food systems that characterize Belgium today owe their existence to the simultaneous colonization of women, peoples of the Global South and nature. Likewise, the mainstreaming of gender issues and the co-opting of concepts such as sustainability and, more recently, agroecology, are hardly attempts to undermine these overlapping systems of oppression;⁵ instead, they are new ways of maintaining the status quo.

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The underlying logic of these overlapping systems is to separate things that are essentially connected, so that the one can be subordinated to the other. For instance, nature-culture, or the classification of people into hierarchical categories of gender or race. The beliefs, values and assumptions associated with being a white male are traditionally considered the sole, standard or superior model.

In industrialized agriculture, for example, heavy machinery, yield and power are valued more than food security or health. Excessive use of toxic pesticides and poor working conditions in, say, Brazil or Vietnam are considered less of a problem than in Europe (except when it comes to contract workers with a migration background). White human lives, according to this logic, are worth more than the lives of people of colour. In a similar vein, soils are not recognized as a vital part of the whole, but as a separate category, an inanimate substrate, which can be passively used to boost production. Yet the fact that soils act as buffers in a liveable climate and resilient food systems is no longer a matter for debate.

Typically, vital labour, such as care tasks within the family or the work of men and women farmers in maintaining ecosystems, is not recognized or valorized. The only thing that matters is what can be included in narrow calculations of productivity.

Soils only matter when it comes to the extraction of raw materials; labour is only dignified when it is paid adequately; food is only valuable only when it is transformed into a commodity. These underlying assumptions and relationships make the continued expansion and intensification of agriculture possible. To achieve more sustainable food systems, radical change is therefore needed. This calls for more visibility of unequal power relations and new conceptual frameworks, relationships and practices that put life at the centre and make healthy food a right. South American feminists have been saying for years that there can be no agroecology without feminism.⁶

In our analysis of the two policy documents, we focus in particular on the role assigned to women in agriculture, and provide ideas for integrating feminist thinking, based on a more complex and holistic vision, into an agroecological approach for the Flemish food strategy.

Gender mainstreaming, instrumentalization and gender inequality

Food security: a key role for women or a burden?

According to the Strategic Paper on 'Agriculture and Food Security', women 'play a key role in the pursuit of food security, high-quality nutrition and family well-being'.⁷ To fulfil that key role, the Ministry of Development Cooperation – like other developmental bodies – sees female empowerment and gender mainstreaming as the answer to the many socioeconomic obstacles that stand in the way of gender equality. The Paper thus seeks to pay more attention to women's 'access to natural resources, means of production and participation in decision-making processes'.⁸ Yet, rather than representing a strategy and clear views, female empowerment and gender mainstreaming remain umbrella terms, or slogans.⁹ Indeed, gender transformative agricultural development can go only as far as the views that underpin it, so it is important to reflect on this Paper's views of women farmers and women farm workers and ask to what extent such views correspond with the reality experienced by the women it seeks to empower.

This focus on the key role of women in food security did not fall out of the sky: a quarter of the world's population is made up of women living in rural areas for whom agriculture is the main source of income.¹⁰ Indeed, women make up 43 percent of the agricultural workforce in the Global South, half of whom live in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹ Moreover, agriculture employs about 60 to 80 percent of women in South Asia and Oceania, and up to 90 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹² These figures should be taken with a grain of salt, however, since unpaid work in subsistence farming – often performed by women – is not taken into account since it is not considered an economic activity. This leads to the underreporting of work performed by women farmers and to the invisibility of their contributions.

Yet figures show that a double phenomenon has been playing out for years in the Global South: the feminization of poverty and the feminization of agriculture. On the one hand, poverty and famine increasingly and disproportionately affect women and girls.¹³ The majority of the 1.5 billion people living on \$1 or less a day are women and children.¹⁴ The pandemic, according to the latest SOFI report, has further widened the gender gap in food security.¹⁵ In 2019, 6 percent more

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women and girls were suffering from hunger compared to men, and in 2020 this was 10 percent more.¹⁶ On the other hand, women increasingly stand in and bear responsibility for the food security of their families and communities, and they are more likely to work on large-scale agricultural projects.¹⁷ And yet 500 million of these women are subsistence farmers doing subsistence farming who do not own land and receive a mere 5 percent

of available agricultural resources.¹⁸ This overrepresentation of women in subsistence and other farming is often attributed to the migration of men looking for other sources of income in more urbanized areas, and to the globalization of food chains.¹⁹

Government and development agencies often use this feminization of agriculture as an argument to promote women's empowerment in the agricultural sector, since it creates an opening for more power and individual freedom.²⁰ Indeed, women have an increasing say in the provision of food for their families,²¹ and they are taking over subsistence farming. But the flip side of the coin is that they do this on top of their reproductive work and caring responsibilities; they are forced to take the place of their partner on the family land to produce for markets; and they become farm workers on large-scale farms.²² Studies show that there is no guarantee that more power and responsibilities at this level will help root out gender inequality,²³ let alone provide more resilience against the consequences of a failing and abusive food system, such as increasing hunger, soaring malnutrition, precarious working conditions in the agro-industry, and climate change.

Instrumentalization or systemic change?

The feminization of agriculture is inextricably linked to the post-war Green Revolution and the neoliberal climate in which our food systems have been operating since the 1980s. This has led to an overemphasis on high-quality, export-oriented food production and a decline in public spending that has resulted in the complete degradation of rural livelihoods. The unequal distribution of goods and resources, and the loss of value of local markets, has only made things worse for people in rural areas.²⁴ Indeed, this context has led to an exponential rise in male migration from rural areas, creating a surplus of female labour in large-scale

farming and subsistence farming.²⁵ The Strategic Paper does not address (nor seem to want to address) these causes. Yet such shifts in agricultural and food systems have a more profound impact on gender roles and the distribution of labour. The COVID-19 pandemic is making these structural gender roles and inequalities much more visible.²⁶ It is precisely because

women take on the lion's share of food production and household care tasks, and make up the majority of farm workers, nurses and care and social workers, that they are on the frontline of the crisis. From a feminist perspective, the COVID-19 crisis is a care crisis in which governments, with a 'save the economy' approach, have failed to put people's interests first, while many transnational corporations continue to gain power.²⁷

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International development and government agencies are only now starting to discuss food systems approaches for making agriculture and food chains more humane, healthy and sustainable. In 2019, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres convened the UN Food System Summit to transform global food systems. Led by Agriculture Minister Hilde Crevits, the Flemish government has also set itself the task of developing an integrated food policy.²⁸

Both promise food system changes. Yet, achieving system changes involves questioning an entire system, having a common understanding of the problem, and addressing the causes of failure.²⁹ In this respect, the food strategies being drafted cannot ignore the fact that today's dominant food systems are the result of the subjugation of entire population groups as well as nature to the previously mentioned interlocking systems of oppression – or colonial capitalist patriarchy. The increased visibility of these inequalities has also brought the advocacy of feminist and other social movements for alternatives based on principles of equality, non-discrimination and interdependence more to the fore.

While the Strategic Paper speaks of gender empowerment, the main focus seems to lie on the instrumentalization of the food security responsibilities of subsistence farmers, to serve a neoliberal agenda of economic growth. The Strategic Paper assumes that there is a pool of women ready to take on that responsibility and turn it into productivity. But empowerment is about removing constraints and offering choices, because women should have the choice to either embrace their existing gender roles as food producers and feel empowered in them, or resolutely escape the constraints imposed by such roles.³⁰ The Strategic Paper on 'Agriculture and Food Security' which came out in 2017 is clearly in need of a revision.

'Leave no one behind' is also about investing in small-scale and subsistence farming

Alongside 'nutrition' and 'sustainable agriculture', 'gender equality and women's empowerment' is one of the three cross-cutting themes of the Strategic Paper. It should therefore form a running thread in the policy and, as the Paper itself states, all Belgian interventions should make a positive contribution in at least one of these themes and in no way lead to deterioration in any of them. The question then arises as to what is meant by 'positive contribution' or progress.

Productivity and participation in markets as the sole indication of progress

Progress is expressed in terms of productivity gains: land, capital and labour must be used more 'efficiently and innovatively', with the main objective being participation in 'markets' and 'value chains'.³¹ This efficiency approach is the finality of the whole 'development vision' of this Paper, which is based on three action areas: promoting participation in markets and value chains, contributing to good governance, and supporting research and innovation. The focus on efficiency has an impact on how the gender dimension is incorporated. The Strategic Paper follows one of the most common gender approaches in development cooperation, which in short reads: 'We empower women so that they can also participate in economic growth, this will moreover make them independent.' The finality, then, is not empowerment and gender equality, but the elimination of gender dimensions that stand in the way of greater productivity. Or, in the words of the Paper: 'Women must be socio-economically empowered so that they can contribute fully to food security and inclusive economic growth.'

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The Paper assumes that improving agricultural productivity will improve participation in markets and value chains, and that this is the best solution for poverty reduction, food security and empowerment. The Paper therefore seems to be counting on the fact that productivity and women's participation in markets will improve by focusing

on a host of factors such as 'equality of social relations and power relationships, both within and outside the family'. Unequal relationships within the family refers to 'the distribution of reproductive tasks between men and women' and not to a valorization of those tasks. Outside the family, the Paper suggests 'improving access to water and sanitation'; an 'increase in economic activity' and 'power of expression'; and the use of ICT to empower women.

Furthermore, the Paper ignores the fact that market access itself is gender specific and gender unequal. There is a whole laundry list of barriers to rural women's participation in the market, even when productivity gains are achieved that should make that participation possible.^{32,33} For example, mobility constraints and socio-cultural norms that make women less likely to access

contract farming.^{34,35} Contract farming often enables farmers to access ‘technical advice, credit and production inputs’. The Strategic Paper ignores these barriers to markets for women and focuses only on the barriers for rural women at other levels, such as access to ‘resources and production inputs’ or participation in ‘decision-making at all levels’.

While all these dimensions are important in their own right, problems seem to occur only at the production level, according to the Paper, and thus outside the markets and value chains themselves. Even for the measures planned in the action area of ‘research and innovation’, the Paper draws the card of productivity gains. There is no research on gender transformation or improving access to healthy food for all. There is no room in the Strategic Paper for a critical interrogation of the status quo based on globalized ‘free’ trade and increased production through technological innovation.

In this way, you create a discourse that gives credence to the idea that eliminating all gender-related obstacles and so-called production-level deficits is enough to fight poverty and hunger, and that we should not dwell on the problems and skewed power relations that the ‘free’ market itself creates, maintains or reinforces.

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Marginalization of self-sufficient women farmers

The Paper goes so far in its glorification of the market and productivity gains through research and innovation that it associates self-sufficient agriculture solely with subsistence and non-productivity.³⁶ In other words, women farmers must be rescued from a marginalized peasant existence and climb the capitalist ladder and become entrepreneurs or agricultural workers. According to the Paper, empowerment is all about ‘the ability of an individual or a community to act independently when making choices in one’s own life and in society’. However, presenting ready-made solutions devised by others offers little in the way of potential when it comes to making choices in a neoliberal climate of profitability and productivity. Another approach would be to ensure that the agency of women farmers and women farm workers as holders of knowledge and rights is not undermined, and that they are given the space (i.e. support and budget) to pursue their collective projects and aspirations.

The Paper does not take into account women who would prefer a form of agriculture that is closer to home, allows them to combine household chores with production, and protects their families from price fluctuations and other economic shocks.³⁷ Studies show that, overall, women farmers in low- and middle-income countries consciously choose for sustainable, organic and agro-ecological farming.³⁸ This is not just because of the limited capital investment that such farming requires, but because it benefits their communities by making affordable, healthy food available.³⁹

The Paper offers opportunities only to women farmers who want to join the productivity race, and ignores the possibility of supporting existing alternative agricultural models based on autonomy, stability and resilience.

Invisibility of women farm workers

'Leave no one behind' is 'the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)'.⁴⁰ Even though the Belgian Paper wants to achieve the SDGs, its strategy is laced with corporate interests and forgets one of the most vulnerable groups and biggest victims of unbridled corporate interests in the agricultural sector: landless women farmers and women farm workers.⁴¹ The Paper accepts that an inclusive economic model means that some unproductive small farmers and landless farmers (30 to 50 percent

of current farmers according to the study model adopted in Paper) will become 'wage labourers'.⁴²

Inclusive enterprise thus entails the selection and by definition exclusion of an entire group of people who do not meet expectations. The Paper offers no strategy for those who are excluded from 'entrepreneurship' and offers few alternatives outside wage labour.

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Nevertheless, research and advocacy highlight the enormous pressures that women farm workers face on a daily basis: they are often denied the minimum wage; they are sometimes stuck in slave labour, without a permanent contract despite continuous work; they generally have fewer work options, which creates a high risk of exploitation; they are given hardly any room to combine their care and reproductive tasks with work, and as a result have to take their children with them to the plantations; they face sexual violence on the way to, and during, work; they can barely exercise their right to strike because trade unions are still male-dominated; and so on.^{43,44}

The 'leave no one behind' principle forces us to focus on discrimination and multiple and intersectional inequality. By contrast, the Strategic Paper focuses on the symptoms of modern society, such as unrestrained population growth, under-nutrition and climate change. Systemic causes and inequalities thus remain hidden from view. Meanwhile, governments and companies perpetuate poor working conditions, exploitation, underpayment, discriminatory laws and discriminatory socioeconomic practices. These are the issues that must be addressed 'to free humanity from poverty and put the planet on a path toward sustainability'.^{45,46}

The private sector is being 'sensitized'

The Belgian strategy of the Ministry of Development Cooperation chooses to 'support and sensitize the private sector on responsible agricultural investments'.⁴⁷ However, the time for sensitization has passed. The private sector is not a homogeneous group of philanthropists. It is no coincidence that civil society

has been clamouring for years for legislation requiring companies to respect human rights and environmental standards in all their activities and throughout their supply chains.^{48,49} The strategy should clearly state who these private actors are and what their added value will be in the sectors in which they are involved. Above all, private sector involvement should not be the main objective for the simple reason that the purpose of private investment is to make a profit and not to invest in things that the most marginalized in society need the most.⁵⁰ Recent research confirms that ‘inclusive agribusiness models’ such as those proposed in the Paper result in income increases for some small-scale farmers but for the majority of the community they actually lead to more inequality and further marginalization, due to the unrealistic expectations underlying those models.⁵¹ This does not provide a long-term guarantee of food security, which is something that women, women farmers and women farm workers need the most and what the Paper sets as its goal.

The Strategic Paper on ‘Agriculture and Food Security’ sees local economic development in terms of value chains and markets. This exacerbates deep-seated inequalities and vulnerabilities because it obscures a comprehensive food system approach. We question this model without idealizing subsistence farming or romanticizing the role of women by seeing women in essentialist terms. Yet we find that the Belgian strategy does not adequately support the contributions and aspirations of women’s and grassroots organizations that work daily to promote healthy, affordable and secure food, while this is just the kind of group it wants to empower. We will still have to wait for a strategy that focuses on the most marginalized, supports and scales up their alternatives, and sets as its goal the creation of non-exploitative employment outside agriculture.

Gender in the Flemish agricultural policy

Invisible

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In stark contrast to the policy paper of the Ministry of Development Cooperation, rural women barely get a mention in the Flemish agricultural policy. But what both policy areas have in common is the prominent role assigned to the paradigm of scaling up efficiency, production and economic growth. In line with EU agricultural policy (which since the 1950s has been committed to drastically reducing the number of farmers by modernizing agriculture), the post-war mechanization, chemicalization and capitalization of Belgian agriculture has been steadily pursued through contemporary policy programmes of ‘smart agriculture’ through digitalization and biotechnological applications.⁵² Flanders considers itself an innovative region where agriculture is subordinate to the chemical and food industries. Subsidies and investments are linked to expansionism, large investments, modern technologies, large machinery and the supply of fresh meat, dairy products, fertilizers, pesticides, processed potatoes and other products for the export market.

Men and women who cannot keep up with this fierce competition leave farming, often through bankruptcy and great human suffering.⁵³ Some farms survive by diversifying into economic activities such as catering and vacation rentals, direct sales or stable rentals for horses. These so-called side businesses are often run by women.

Only 11 percent of Flanders's 20,000 agricultural and horticultural businesses are run by women. These numbers are well below the European averages. The Agricultural Policy Paper of 2019-2024 aims to 'pay sufficient attention to women entrepreneurs in agriculture and horticulture'.⁵⁴ Hilde Crevits's paper also states that the agricultural holdings act will be made 'gender-neutral'.

So much for gender vision in the Flemish agricultural policy. Besides providing the same statistics on farm managers, the annual agricultural reports make us none the wiser about the role and situation of women in Flemish agriculture.⁵⁵ Moreover, as the Catholic Training Work of Rural Women notes in *Vilt*, these statistics only highlight the traditionally male character of agriculture. Assisting women are not included in the figures. In practice, however, the role of assisting mothers, spouses and sisters is crucial to the smooth running of Flemish farms. Women in agriculture often combine helping on the farm with a job outside the home and household chores.⁵⁶ Time management research of the past few decades shows that women between the ages of 18 and 75 perform an average of 58 percent unpaid labour, compared with 40 percent of men in Flemish households. This includes cleaning, cooking and caring for children or the elderly.⁵⁷ It is no exaggeration to say that women in agriculture often have a triple workload. Moreover, with fewer women as farm managers and more unpaid work, it is more difficult for women in European agriculture to access credit and land.⁵⁸

The fact that women farmers and gardeners in Flanders are largely absent from studies and reports on Flemish agriculture and horticulture was also found in a 2011 report on women in agriculture in Flanders.⁵⁹ This study points out that agricultural organizations in Flanders have women's sections (KVLV-Agra and Vrouwen-ABS) but there are 'no studies on the contribution women make in agricultural interest groups and agricultural policy'. So, judging by existing research, we are currently in the dark as regards women in agricultural and horticultural businesses in Flanders.

Women in agriculture are more concerned with community health and the common good than with crop yields.

Who are they? What bottlenecks do they encounter? How do they see the needs and future of agriculture? What change ideas are they working on?

This blindness to the labour and presence of women in agriculture in analyses and policies, within a context of inequality – as demonstrated by the scant data available – leads to the perpetuation of inequality.^{60,61} Moreover, international research highlights the role played by women in the transformation of food systems and shows that the underrepresentation of women in areas

of knowledge production and exchange also leads to a short-sighted view that focuses too much on male experiences and needs.⁶² And other research shows that women in agriculture are more concerned with community health and the common good than with crop yields.⁶³ In both the North and South, investment in women in agriculture is linked to increased food security.⁶⁴

Masculinization of agriculture

More insights and information concerning women on farms in Flanders are desperately needed to support the transformation of agriculture from a policy perspective. While more insight into the numbers is important, the so-called masculinization of agriculture is about more than that: it refers to values and norms focused on productivity. In 'modern' agricultural systems, symbolized by monocultures and the concentration of power, success is measured by efficiency in extracting labour and raw materials and in transporting food products here and there. Modern globalized agricultural systems still seem to have little to do with feeding people. They are not understood as part of a larger whole of organic cycles and symbiosis, in continuity with human communities and their cultures. The soils, biodiversity, water and people that underpin life are not valued or understood as the foundations of food systems.⁶⁵ Because of this denial and undervaluation, Belgian supermarkets are being filled at the expense of people in the Global South; at the expense of women; at the expense of soils, water quality and bio-diversity; and at the expense of farming as a craft.

The agriculture and horticulture that Crevits envisions is one of economic growth through high-tech innovation and renewal. This vision for agriculture focuses primarily on strengthening Flanders's position in the world market. Flemish agricultural and horticultural businesses will be supported as a priority in 'their pursuit of a profitable earning model'.⁶⁶ The policy paper focuses on sufficient food that is healthy, safe and sustainable, addresses animal welfare and is characterized by a correct, market-based price for each link in the food chain. The idea is that,

together with the sector, a shift will be made from 'a production model to a sustainable earnings model'. The policy's underlying assumptions – market expansion and creating opportunities for accumulation – are therefore at odds with the sustainability agendas it necessarily forms part of.

Food systems owned by private interests will primarily provide activities that are profitable to such interests.

The further roll-out of a productivity logic that undermines the resilience of women and men in agriculture, depletes soils and impoverishes biodiversity, etc. will not solve the problems of malnutrition, diet-related health issues, the disruption of ecophysical processes, or the recognition and decent income of the women and men who produce and prepare food. The high-tech precision agriculture that Crevits is banking on is linked to intellectual

property schemes that encourage further concentration of power through patenting or massive data collection.⁶⁷ Food systems owned by private interests will primarily provide activities that are profitable to such interests. Moreover, playing the card of technology in the hands of a few transnational corporations, at the expense of the autonomy and resilience of peasant agriculture, will further erode knowledge and skills accumulated over the centuries on how to best care for life.

The idealization of care tasks and appropriation of unpaid work

The instrumentalization of women in Belgium's agricultural agenda for the Global South, and the invisibility of women farmers and women farm workers in Flanders may seem to be separate issues, but they are causally linked by global free trade and shared conceptual frameworks in agricultural policy, education and research. As mentioned previously, these conceptual frameworks create a fictitious separation and hierarchical ordering of culture/nature, human/non-human, male/female, productive/non-productive, where the superior element seeks to control the marginalized other.

This has important implications for progressive agricultural agendas. As long as all the work that involves caring for people, soils and water, seeds and animals is considered unproductive, the only way forward is that of productivity and economic growth. As a consequence, the only real change in the role of women in agriculture is that there are more female farm managers who are better assimilated in production systems geared towards international markets.

As political-ecological feminists cogently argue, care activities or reproductive work are simultaneously idealized and rendered invisible in economic conceptual frameworks and models.⁶⁸ Care activities – the vast majority of which fall on the shoulders of women and migrants – are considered 'natural' and taken for granted. It becomes normal not to see such activities as work, or not to pay for them. At the same time, the image of rural women as poster children for international intervention programmes, or the statues erected for innovative women in agriculture,⁶⁹ creates a sense of appreciation for their work which is divorced from the real material situation. Then again, what counts economically (productivity and profit) is viewed as separate from the relations of oppression towards other economic actors, plants or animals.

The idealization of women in the Global South for their work in sustaining local communities, the failure to recognize women's work in Flemish agriculture, and the objectification of nature are, therefore, not only comparable but have common roots. The background is the modern worldview that separates nature from economics. As Marie Mies and Veronica Bernholdt argue, according to this worldview, exchanges between humans and nature are invisible in economic calculations and are seen as 'natural processes'. Care relationships, such as raising children, are part of these natural processes. The idealization of these non-economic processes of care and nature makes them freely accessible. This modern notion of what natural processes

are explains the appropriation of land (land grabs in the Global South), privatization through patents on hereditary traits, or unpaid work by women in agriculture. It is only by exploiting nature (e.g. for mining, tree plantations, livestock farming, etc.) or by having women produce for the market that they can be seen as productive and therefore valuable.

Lessons for an agroecological food strategy

While climate change and a rampant pandemic drive hunger and malnutrition, it is clear that current mainstream food strategies are not equipped to lead the transformations to sustainable food systems. Both the UN World Food Summit in autumn 2021 and the related Flemish Food Strategy put sustainable food systems high on the political agenda. However, social movements and scholars expressed concerns about the summit's approach. They drew attention to the strong corporate influence, the exclusion of farming communities and social movements, and the lack of a human rights approach and truly transformative vision.⁷⁰

The international buzz surrounding food systems is a perfect opportunity for the agroecological movement to more fully embrace the insights of various forms of poly-ecological feminism, if we want to move towards food systems in which access to sufficient and healthy food is a right for all. In Belgium, too, the movements for agroecology and organic farming have made big strides in putting the need for different relationships between humans and nature on the political agenda. The danger of mainstreaming agroecology is that it loses sight of the crucial causes of inequality arising from the historical, political, economic, demographic and environmental context.⁷¹ A greater focus on the related dismantling of inequality and exploitation is therefore a crucial next step. Based on our gender analysis of the existing policy documents, we provide four stepping stones for a transformative agroecological food strategy.

First: An unconditional commitment to non-discrimination and equity takes priority and is non-negotiable.

Women are disproportionately affected by poverty and food insecurity. Failure to call out the differences with respect to health, mental and physical well-being, economic autonomy, etc. as a function of gender, class, age and ethnicity render invisible those who suffer the most from the unjust economic, social, ecological and health consequences of industrialized food systems. Failure to recognize contextual vulnerability also makes it difficult to devise and implement differential and adapted measures.

Second: A sustainable food strategy takes into account the ecological, social and economic realities it creates and sustains elsewhere in the world.

Linked to the first stepping stone, the choices made in Flanders can only be understood by placing them in the broader international framework. Three-quarters of Flemish food consumption relies on jobs in Africa, Asia, South America and the Pacific. A Flemish/Belgian food policy cannot promote sustainable local strategies and in the same breath take a protectionist stance, focusing on foreign export-oriented agriculture, using cheap migrant labour and endorsing unfair trade agreements. Agroecology and food sovereignty call for a territorial approach and equality, not from the point of view of protectionism but rather the right to self-determination and international solidarity.

Third: An agroecological approach is gender transformative. It focuses on women's knowledge, participation, representation, rights and responsibilities.

Women and farm workers are not only the first victims of globalized food systems; they are also the first drivers of change, to ensure that everyone has access to healthy food. Moving past the stereotype that they are 'vulnerable' or stakeholders to be consulted, rural women – just like other farm workers – are active agents with knowledge and rights in establishing equitable and sustainable food systems.

Fourth: As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, systems which are based on the principles and values of solidarity, respect for people and the environment and cooperation are more resilient. Embracing these principles and feminine forms of knowledge that put life at the centre is vital for dealing with a growing uncertainty about the future.

This contrasts sharply with strategies based on productivity gains and better market access. The existing Belgian and Flemish agricultural policy papers uphold a mechanistic view of nature and the idea of food as nothing more than a commodity; they serve the interests of the agro-industry and the technology and financial sectors. Escaping from this will require different conceptual frameworks and narratives. Agroecology can help us to rethink food systems as part of a set of interwoven ecological processes and social relationships, and to elevate food to what it really is: a right and common good.

Bio

Fairouz Gazdallah is a policy officer at Solidagro, an NGO which advocates for the right to food for all and supports the right of peoples and states to determine their own food and agricultural policies autonomously.

Barbara Van Dyck is affiliated with the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience at Coventry University. She also forms part of the coordination of Agroecology-in-Action and the Belgian network of agroecologists (GIRAF).

Notes

1. <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit>
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