

Gender, environment and place based globalism

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Times of Crisis

Critical engagement from a gender perspective

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Introduction

Thank you for the great honour of speaking at this Conference to mark the contribution of Parto to gender research in rural regions which includes important contribution to gender and diversity in relation to human ecology, her networking and leadership in connecting gender and global issues in the work of the university.

Let me begin with some personal remarks.

My first encounter with Parto

[PPT 1]

was in Rome some years back when she gave a marvelous talk at a conference held in IFAD on her field work in Iran. Her talk introduced to me the term 'meal security', along with new ways of seeing the world with some stunning pictures by Iranian artists.

[PPT2]

Her humour and passion as well as her profound intellectual challenges to rural development 'givens' immediately drew me to her.

Since then, we have pursued our intellectual interests in gender, food and rural development issues in two very memorable meetings in Bolsena, Italy and another here in Berlin. We found European funds to bring together women from around Europe to speak about feminist political ecology gender and food. We debated, celebrated and enjoyed exploring feminist approaches to the political ecology of producing, preparing and consuming food. This involved not only food for thought, but also partaking in the time honoured culture of making food – whether grandmothers teaching us how to make pasta in a 17th century convent kitchen, [PPT3]

or Iranian chefs showing us how to make the famous Iranian rice dish Polou

[PPT4]

in the elegance of a grand Berlin home. We also visited slow food producers, talked to celebrated authors, met with celebratory chefs, and worked with community based organisers redistributing food.

These encounters contained the essence of what makes Parto so special – her ability to make connections, bring out the importance, the colour and culture of women's work alongside serious challenges to the patriarchal biases and inequalities in rural development research. All of this, and much more, we are celebrating in these days. I am deeply grateful for the chance to

acknowledge Parto's originality, engagement and openness to feminist ideas and practice, as well as her generosity and sense of fun. And let me add style – not only her clothes which I greatly admire – but who else would chose a BMW sports car because of its bright yellow colour?

[PPT5]

My contribution to this conference is to share with you how I am trying to rethink issues around sustainable development and environmental studies from a feminist political ecological perspective with some thoughts on gender, environment and place-based globalism in the context of the multiple crises we are facing.

Outline of the talk

I start my talk by defining some of my analytical premises informing my feminist political ecology approach. I then move on to look at some examples of women's mobilizing in defense of their territories in the movements towards food sovereignty and slow food.

[PPT6]

I look at these mobilizations as part of what I call place-based globalism where women defend their own and their communities' livelihoods, and in so doing, challenge the current unjust global production, trade and consumption patterns around food production.

[PPT 7]

Gender relations as part of the environment

[PPT 8]

In speaking about gender and environment, I start from the premise that there are core gender differences in the experience and responsibility towards the environment and maintaining livelihoods. These gendered differences are not rooted in biology per se, but rather are shaped by gendered processes that determine resource access and control as well as ecological change interacting with class, caste, race, age, culture and ethnicity. Gender relations inform the struggle of men and women to sustain ecologically viable livelihoods and the prospects of any community for sustainable development. The meaning of community and environment differ from place to place but environmental rights and justice are deeply enmeshed in and determined by gender relations.

Place-based globalism.

[PTT 9]

In understanding the links between gender and environment, I am particularly interested in how women experience the environment in place. I understand place as beginning with women's bodies, as the place closest in, and moving out to include locality, territories, and global spatial processes that are also informing and determining place and the environment. In maintaining community and family livelihoods, it is often women who are the most responsible and who take a lead in defending the safety and wellbeing of their community and environment. I am interested in how these struggles by women to defend their environment in place offer sources of creativity, culture, and alternative

development, which interact with global processes through what I am calling place based globalism.

Place based globalism then, includes women's struggle for the right to live and work in a healthy environment, the right to take responsibility to protect ecologies, livelihoods and natural resources from over use, extraction and destruction. It also includes women's rights to healthy and well body; the right to produce, prepare and consume healthy and culturally appropriate food; the right to care for the household, the community and landscape. In this context, women's collective action against environmental degradation and the search for food sovereignty, health and wellbeing, and cultural integrity can be understood as a global place based political response to unhealthy economic and environmental development policies. Women's collective struggles to retain control over the global commons are shaping and challenging inequitable neo liberal capitalist globalization and development processes.

Feminist Political Ecology

[PPT10]

I would like to propose that as we rethinking sustainable development in times of crisis, place-based globalism can be seen as the basis for re-visioning political practice at a global scale, based on specific gendered local experiences. In this re-envisioning I share the principles of feminist political ecology. As set out by Dianne Rocheleau feminist political ecology:

- Acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life and the relevance of power relations including gender relations in decision making about the environment.
- Recognizes power relations underlying the structures which operate to the benefit of certain classes and groups
- Seeks to understand how specific ecological and livelihood systems are linked into national, global environmental economic and political systems which shape enable and limit the local
- Questions the presumption of technological progress and the domination of nature

I would also add to this set of FPE principles, the vision of Silvia Federici on the commons.

[PPT11]

Federici argues for a feminist inspired reconstruction of the commons that could build new communities based on quality relations, principles of cooperation and responsibility: to people, to the earth, the forests, the seas and the animals. She speaks about 'commoning reproduction'. By pooling resources of reproduction, she suggests we could disentangle our livelihoods from the world market as women 'refuse to accept that our reproduction occurs at the expense of the world's other commoners and commons'.

She proposes that if reproductive labor is recognized as an important sphere of human activity, women can reshape the commons to become the foundation of new forms of social

reproduction in order to meet our basic needs and to guard against ecological disaster.

Moving on from these premises underlying my talk, I now turn to some examples of women's place-based activities in the struggle for food sovereignty.

Gender, crises and bioeconomies

[PTT12]

Producing, preparing, finding and consuming the food we put on the table is a complex gendered process. It is about social and cultural traditions, labour, love, economics and power within the home, society and in the market place. In today's globalized world, the industrial agricultural system operates through highly complex networks which link political and economic interests, agricultural and marketing practices, consumer demands and acts of care in the preparation of food eaten at our tables.

The wave of food crises since 2008 has opened up to the popular imagination critical questions about who dominates these complex agro-industrial networks and consequently who has access to food, whether at national, community or household level. The global attention given to the food crises and the recent surge of interest in 'feeding the world' by agribusiness is creating a new bio-economy based on the enclosure of southern land, accompanied by a normative appeal to securing world food and green fuel.

Large scale agribusiness have begun to appropriate enormous amounts of land for agro-industrial enterprises and biofuel production.

[PPT 13]

In the process of this land grabbing, the number of land conflicts has grown, as well as open resistance and struggle against government pro-investor policies often led by women. Women smallholder producers in different places around the world, refuse to give up their traditional claim to usufruct rights to the land in order to produce food for the family/community – making it difficult for agro-industry to appropriate all the land.

The bio-economy is changing gender relations. Women and men adjust differently to agro-industrial production. Even if women are earning more (a sort of feminization of rural labour in the agro industries seems to be happening), within this bio-economy there continues to be a strong gender division to the entitlement to productive resources, land, life-stock, agricultural facilities and credit as well as divisions within the household allocation of food. Women have a crucial role in providing food, even if they have little access to credit, land, training, and the use of rudimentary technology.

[PTT 14]

As feminist research shows, the model on which the agro business determining global food production and consumption is built is flawed. The assumption is that providing food in rural areas is an individual or family concern, so if women earn more, then their families will eat. However, in most rural communities women provide not only for their immediate family but also for other children, orphans, families, poorer labourers, the unemployed and youth. Food security is not just about money to buy food. The time and access to resources other than cash to meet caring obligations to the community are critical. What is determining food security are non monetary values - charity, benevolence, generosity, gratitude, caring and helping. All of which are based on personal interactions, time and networking that inform livelihoods and well-being. Rural women's identity is wrapped up in these obligations, responsibilities and capacities to provide food for others.

Because the vision of underlining agribusiness and rural agricultural projects does not take into account the broader gendered food 'network' or 'system' the collective and community-oriented aspects of food security, articulated by smallholder women is not heard and women are responding by mobilizing against agribusinesses in various place based global actions.

[PPT 15]

Women place based global struggles for food sovereignty

One of the most known networks mobilizing against large agrobusiness is La Via Campesina. With around 300 million members, La Via Campesina brings together peasant and indigenous movements in the struggle for territorial recognition and rights, addressing inequities in access, ownership, and control of resources. In its actions around the world, starting in the late 1990s La Via Campesina calls for food sovereignty or the right of self-determination of local communities to produce their own food in their own territory and to govern, manage, and care for their eco-systems and natural wealth.

[PPT16]

La Via Campesina is a globally networked source of resistance to the crisis driven bio economy and an important example of place-based globalism which puts gender at the centre of its call for social justice and equity. It has been a key vehicle for rural women to advance women's economic, cultural and social claims to equality.

The call to food sovereignty is both a mobile and a mobilizing utopian vision. It encompasses human rights, women's rights and the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. It expands people's sense of possibility and sketches the contours for a common project that challenges, historical power inequalities and in doing so critiques neoliberal economic development by nurturing an alternative imaginary.

Since its founding, Via Campesina has promoted a “female peasant” identity that is politicized, linked to land, food production and the defense of food sovereignty—built in opposition to the current agribusiness model. At the heart of La Via Campesina, the struggle of women is situated at two levels: defending their rights as women within organizations and society in general, and the struggle as peasant women together with their colleagues against the neoliberal model of agriculture

The women of La Via Campesina see their struggle as not only economic and class based, but also cultural in that they ask for a revalorization of their traditional wisdom regarding the production of food, the selection and management of seeds, the breeding of animals, and the care of the earth and nature.

[PPT 17]

Symbolically at La Via Campesina events the opening *mística* - a ceremonial act which recognizes peasant and indigenous values and ideals - is seen as nourishing the spirit of struggle. The preparation of the *mística* is principally the task of women as the tangible expression of peasant culture and represents a challenge to and defiance of the modern economic systems that oppress and marginalize them.

La Via Campesina also operates in Italy. More well known though is the slow food movement founded in 1986 to protest at the opening of McDonald's in Rome. Slow Food has around 360

convivi chapters in Italy which promote local artisans, local farmers, and local flavors through taste workshops, wine tastings, and farmers' markets.

[PTT 18]

Slow Food's motto is that "eating is an agricultural act and producing is a gastronomic act." The organization addresses issues of food, globalization and ethical production with the emphasis on connecting producers with socially invested consumers, or co-producers. Slow Food promotes the importance of well-produced and good-tasting food and for the defense of cultures of meal and food production in the face of 'fast food' based on the industrialized production, distribution and economies of scale. Slow Food aims to protect and support small producers, and to link them with those who are making decisions high up in the food production chain - the consumers, educational institutions, chefs and cooks, and agricultural research institutions.

Since 2004 a global meeting called Terra Madre (mother earth) is held in Turin bringing together the slow food network of food communities and producers.

[PPT 19]

Terra Madre brings together the different workers in the global food chain – the rural food producers with those that value their work and want to sustain good meal cultures. Thousands of producers from 130 countries together with 1000s of cooks and researchers in support of local sustainable food production have come together to oppose food production methods in the

globalized market place. Slow Food's concept of 'Virtuous Globalization', for example, posits that a global system like Terra Madre can assist farmers by creating a network of self-sufficient local economies, and the powerful interdependent linkages forged through these connected local economies holds the capacity to confront neoliberal structures.

[PPT20]

Talking to women farmers and producers who participate in the convivi, many women lead these local groups as they struggle to establish eco-farming and to keep rural sector going in Italy. Though they point out that gender dynamics at the top of the organization is male dominated. Issues like class, gender, ethnicity, are still to be clearly addressed and talking about "food communities" needs to be further nuanced in relation to issues around democracy and equality.

Slow Food as both a food-centered narrative and practice is an interesting place based global movement responding and shaping the social and economic changes and processes brought on by capitalism, technology, and its informational and bureaucratic complexities.

From my observations in Bolsena, Slow Food offers an interesting space where local- foods initiatives can link with synergies with tourism as women producers generate financial support through relationships with socially- and environmentally-conscious tourists.

I should not that slow food is quite an elite organization. La Via

Campesina is far more politically engaged in global politics of food. And in Italy there are other movements that are more radical again, even clandestine in their defiance of European food policies around local production of for example eggs, milk and cheese.

Rethinking rural economy and food production

These examples of women's place based globalism illustrate the way connections are formed that support local struggles through globally networked campaigns, knowledge sharing and advocacy. These political struggles are local but with a wider reach so that places are not isolated but stretch beyond the local environs in a complex global interaction of flows of information that support local mobilizing.

As women mobilize to safeguard their environment, food sovereignty, bodily integrity, livelihoods and future they are part of the growing networks of people's environmental justice movements in a strong challenge to current global production and consumption patterns, agricultural and trade agreements and development policy. These place-based global networks link different gendered experiences of environment, community and self in 'rooted networks' of cooperation. They are shaping and changing social and ecological ways of understanding environment and gendered knowledge within it.

To quote the Turkish anthropologist Arif Dirlik, place-based global politics approached through the experience of women is ultimately generating a new language of cultures of development so that we

may begin to think and act in the world in new ways. And, as Rocheleau stated in 1996, as women redefine their identities, and the meaning of gender through expressions of human agency and collective action emphasizing struggle, resistance and cooperation... they have also begun to redefine environmental issues to include women's knowledge, experience and interests.

[PPT 21]

Conclusion

In responding to the crises we need to build from these experiences and challenges to the unsustainability of the current agribusiness model. We cannot separate out the local experiences of injustice and gender inequality from the global agro business industry. Place-based mobilizing in response to the crises show that confronting the crises requires far more than just better policies, or more efficient international agreements between business and state institutions.

Place-based global responses to crises show that bringing change requires new values, and ways of working that value good food, safe homes, care for others and nature, generosity and reciprocity. These are romantic alternatives or feminine ways of life, but are pragmatic and needed shifts to economic and social processes that would shift agricultural and consumer patterns, recognize the importance of social reproduction and our collective responsibility we all have to the global commons.

Personally I take heart in the ways these links are being made in women's place based global practices, interwoven as they are with the crises. It is important in our activism and research that we

break down concepts of global and local, agricultural and science, rural and urban. By refusing to put knowledge and action into silos we can find the holistic response needed to the systemic crises. For me that begins with understanding how to change the global within our own place acknowledging the interconnectedness of our lives, and the ways power relations are molding personal and global realities.