Nyéléni: A woman's name for the struggle for Food Sovereignty

In Africa there is a story that has been passed down through the years about a woman from Mali named Nyéléni, who challenged patriarchal power by excelling at something that was considered “men's work”: agriculture. As well as defeating her male opponents in farming competitions, she also managed to overcome the arid climate and domesticate crops like fonio and samio, which made it possible to feed the whole population of Mali .

The Forums on Food Sovereignty, first organized in 2007 in Mali by La Via Campesina and other social organizations to reaffirm the foundations of the concept of food sovereignty, are called Nyéléni Forums in her honour. Her name has also been given to the newsletter created as a tool for communication and exchange to support the struggle for food sovereignty.

The Nyéléni Newsletter (www.nyeleni.org) has now reached its first anniversary, and marked it by recalling, “Day by day, women face problems due to the fact of being women. Either in the countryside or in the city, they are faced with an economic system that discriminates them since it is both a capitalist and patriarchal system. This system is based on the division between production and reproduction. Market activities are considered part of the production, and the tasks usually done by women are considered part of the reproduction, thus making invisible the link between both.”

However, it goes on to stress, “In contrast with this division, feminist economy broadens the notion of *labor* (1) once again and differentiates it from the notion of*employment* (paid work or market work) in order to include the biological and social reproduction tasks in the definition of *labor*, i.e. housework, community work, care. Food Sovereignty is also part of this notion, since it recognizes the fundamental work done by women, and it also implies the redistribution and equality of tasks between all the household members.”

From this perspective, agribusiness is a highly illustrative example of how the patriarchal and capitalist economy, based on a corporate model of exploitation and concentration, causes impacts on the lives of women, “from the most evident social costs, such as the displacement of peasants, or the ones related to labor exploitation in general, to the most invisible ones, that are related – for example – to the sexual division of labor. In the highly mechanized sectors, like soy and sugar cane production, the most qualified jobs are done by men, while women do support tasks, such as cleaning or cooking. Meanwhile, in intensive sectors like fruit and flowers, women are hired for their ability to carry out delicate tasks (such as fruit packaging) without there being a specific economic retribution for that: in fact, young women are usually hired for a meagre salary without enjoying workers' rights.”

On industrial eucalyptus plantations, women are typically hired to work with the seedlings in nurseries – a delicate task – or in the application of chemical herbicides and pesticides, since they are considered to be more “responsible” than men, even though this poses greater health risks for them.

One of the articles in Nyéléni Newsletter Number 6 (http://www.nyeleni.org/DOWNLOADS/newsletters/Nyeleni_Newsletter_Num_6_EN.pdf) notes that in

practice, the growing market economy tends to exacerbate already existing inequalities, both with regard to the labour exploitation associated with agribusiness and to differential access to land between men and women. According to FAO (2), as land becomes a marketable asset and available land becomes scarcer, male household and community members may undermine the access women previously enjoyed, particularly in the case of widowed and divorced women. Although on average they make up 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries (3), women own less than 15% of land worldwide (4). By denying women equal access to land – which should not necessarily be limited to private property, since it is possible to have rights over land through the lease of state land or through community land – their economic, social and political situation is negatively affected. This is directly linked with the patriarchal system, which provides that land is inherited on the father's side, and that women can only access land through their male children, husbands or their male relatives.

In the case of forest women, their eviction from their territories to make way for commercial projects and “protected area” initiatives has also led to their relative disempowerment, compared to their situation in the times when their peoples lived as hunters and gatherers. In those times, it is likely that collective rights over large areas of forest allowed women to exercise autonomy in their use of the land, and their hunting or gathering rights did not depend on men. Today, in many situations the loss of access to the food resources formerly provided by the forest has had a heavy impact on women, who are primarily responsible for providing food for their families on a daily basis. This means that these projects not only impact on the situation of women, but also on the food sovereignty of their communities as a whole.

But women are fighting back, with Nyéléni as a symbol of the difficulties they must confront and overcome. Landless rural women workers of Brazil, expatriated in their own country and tired of living precariously, have stood up against the “green deserts” of eucalyptus plantations operated by Stora Enso, Fíbria, Suzano and ArcelorMittal, financed by BNDES (see WRM Bulletin 165); in India, around 100 women leaders from seven states gathered in Dumka, in the state of Jharkhand, to hold a consultation on women's rights under the Forest Rights Act and to call for community governance, led by women, over the 7.5 million hectares of forest land (see WRM Bulletin 165); in Papua New Guinea, women have organized to more effectively fight back against the expansion of oil palm plantations (see WRM Bulletin 152); in Africa, they created the African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF) to promote women's rights to land and forest resources in West and Central Africa.

The struggle continues, and, as women in Argentina have declared (see WRM Bulletin Nº 158), “We will keep up our resistance and our struggle for as long as necessary, not only against the expansion of monoculture exotic tree plantations and pulp and paper industry megaprojects, but against all processes that entail the commodification of living beings and the disempowerment of women. We, the women, have the power to bring about something new, and we are doing it.”

1 – Since industrial development, “only paid work or freelance work is considered as labour, and therefore all non-paid activities done by household members to meet their own needs are not considered labour. This in fact restricts the original definition of labour to activities related with market labour.” (Cristina Carrasco, *La sostenibilidad de la vida humana, ¿un asunto de mujeres?*, 2001).

2 – A gender perspective on land rights: Equal footing, FAO, 2007

3 – FAO, 2011