



# Women of La Via Campesina: Creating and Occupying our Rightful Spaces

*Nettie Wiebe\**

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of La Via Campesina is a proud celebration of a great many things. It is an opportunity to reflect on some of our many struggles, victories, campaigns, gains, losses, joys and sorrows: globally, in our regions, in our countries, in our organizations, our neighbourhoods and in our own lives.

In the course of its two decade history, La Via Campesina has become one of the most dynamic, broadly-based, important movements in the world, embracing unparalleled diversity while struggling in solidarity for food sovereignty, social and political justice and the protection of land and life.

Women have been key participants and leaders in La Via Campesina. In fact, the role of women is part of what makes our movement unique both in the history of peasant movements and among other international social movements and organizations.

In my view, the work, perspectives, analysis, energy, leadership and presence of women in La Via Campesina has fundamentally shaped and strengthened our movement.

Certainly, I have been personally shaped and strengthened by being part of our movement. Each of us comes from our own family and community, arriving from a wide range of experiences and cultures. However, like most rural women, I have incorporated my public and political work into my life alongside my home and family responsibilities. Unlike many of our male counterparts, most of us know what it is to arrange for the care of children by other family members or neighbours, to make sure that the washing is done and there is prepared food in the kitchen before being able

to leave for meetings. Our activism and engagement as women in the movement often demands that we add yet more work to days already filled with food production, family and household care, cooking, waged labour and many other demands. But, speaking from my experience, our activism and solidarity also gives us more energy, encouragement, confidence and happiness.

As a woman who had the great honour and responsibility of serving in a leadership role in La Via Campesina (ICC member and alternate member) for more than a decade, I feel enormous pride in, and respect for, the millions of women who strive to make this movement strong and life-giving, despite all the challenges.

What follows are some of my recollections and observations about our work as women of La Via Campesina.

## **Opening Spaces**

The first organizing meeting for La Via Campesina occurred in Mons, Belgium in 1993. However, a year earlier, the Union Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (UNAG) of Nicaragua had invited some leaders from progressive peasant and farmer organizations to their annual congress to consider the grave consequences of the trade negotiations underway at that time. The leaders agreed that the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) posed a terrible threat to peasant and small-scale agriculture everywhere and must be resisted.

The president of my organization, the National Farmers Union (NFU) of Canada, was among the invitees to that meeting because the women of the NFU (I was the Women's President) had already built a good relationship with the women of UNAG. So UNAG knew about the NFU of Canada.

The Managua Declaration that resulted from the congress was the work of the all-male leadership that met in Nicaragua. The document contains no mention of women or gender.

The following year when peasant leadership gathered in Mons, Belgium, laying the foundation for an authentic, global peasant movement to resist the neo-liberal agenda of the GATT and build an alternative to that destructive madness, La Via Campesina was born. About twenty per cent of those present were women and their participation and leadership was effective as reflected in the final text.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference of La Via Campesina in Tlaxcala, Mexico in 1996 was the next global gathering of delegates representing peasant and small farmer organizations from around the world. Again, about twenty per cent of the participants were women – and they were active, influential and important contributors to the discussions.

However, when the delegates convened in their regional meetings to select the leaders that would make up the International Coordinating Committee (ICC) of La Via Campesina, all of those chosen were men.

The women, as well as some of our male counterparts, found this unacceptable. An authentic peasant movement must surely be more reflective of peasantry, which includes both women and men. A tense discussion ensued and the regional caucuses (eight at that time) were reconvened.

The North America region, including our Mexican host organization, UNORCA, chose to name me as the representative to the Coordinating Committee. I was the newly elected President of the National Farmers Union (the first and only woman to lead a national farm organization in Canada where, as elsewhere in the world, agriculture is a deeply patriarchal sector).

When we reassembled in the plenary there was palpable relief that the gender barrier had been breached with the election of a woman to the ICC. I understood the enormous responsibility with which I had been entrusted. But I also knew from that moment onward that I was surrounded and embraced and supported by wonderful, strong women and men who shared the vision of creating a movement of equality and justice for women.

An International Women's Working Group was formed to focus on articulating our analysis, enhancing our capacity and realizing our political and social equality both within our organizations and movement as well as in all other aspects of our lives. La Via Campesina would be a ground where we would learn, struggle and strengthen our fight for equality, dignity and respect for women's rights.

The women on South and Central America already had Women's Commissions in their organizational structures and were successfully creating spaces and developing leadership capacity. By the next meeting of the ICC in San Salvador a Women's Commission model was adopted in La Via Campesina.

An intense schedule of organizing and political activity followed. With the determined, dedicated, efficient, resourceful and tireless work of many women and the women leaders in many Via Campesina organizations, supported by technical staff who shared our passion for women's equality, we held women's information and capacity building meetings and gender workshops in many regions. We also participated effectively in a range of initiatives, demonstrations and public events to gain ground, making our voices heard on issues such as access to land, seeds, food sovereignty, education, health, human rights and democratic participation.

Learning from the experiences of the women of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (the CLOC), the women of La Via Campesina adopted a pattern of holding women's assemblies before major events or conferences in order to ensure that we were well prepared to articulate our perspectives and positions in the general conferences and plenaries. Because public spaces have historically been dominated by men, it can be difficult for women to make themselves heard. Holding preliminary women's meetings helps us to understand each other better, build trusting relationships, validate our experiences and analysis and gives us confidence to occupy our rightful spaces effectively. These women's gatherings are also often filled with joy and great fun!

Our objective has been to attain genuine equality between women and men, including equal democratic participation. An obvious target to move us towards that goal is to have equal numbers of women and men at all levels of the organization and in decision-making conferences. We sought to achieve gender parity by the 3<sup>rd</sup> La Via Campesina conference in Bangalore, India in 2000.

We organized our 1<sup>st</sup> International Women's Assembly for the days immediately preceding the general conference. Despite some logistical difficulties, this women's assembly was a powerful event where women of La Via Campesina from all regions of the world worked together on many key issues.

Although we did not quite achieve equal numbers in the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference we made impressive strides towards that goal. Even more importantly, we pressed for a fundamental structural change in La Via Campesina ensuring gender parity in the leadership at the regional and global levels. A constitutional change was adopted that enlarges the ICC to include two members from each region, one male and one female.

I was personally very gratified by this structural change. Agrarian feminists in Canada had fought for, and won, gender parity in Farmers Unions long before my time so I had experience of this form of affirmative action. It is one more step towards equality. I was extremely gratified, although not surprised, that my male counterparts in the ICC in 2000 embraced this recommendation wholeheartedly and I felt a wave of gratitude, pride and hope when the motion was adopted by the Conference.

## **The Changing Shape of the Spaces**

Rural and indigenous women have a long history of oppression and struggle. We have made some major gains in some contexts and regions. Feminist struggles have resulted in the recognition of women's rights as human rights, rights to education and resources and improved social status for some women.

However the gains are very far from universal. Patriarchal power and injustices continue to be the daily reality for most women.

The increasing corporate concentration of land and resources makes rural women's struggle for access to land ever more difficult. As more and more rural families are displaced, women are less secure and more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. The issue of violence against women was publicly confronted within our movement at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Women's Assembly and the 5<sup>th</sup> Conference in Maputo, Mozambique in 2008. The Campaign to Stop Violence Against Women was launched and continues.

Women in La Via Campesina initiated and continue to be key to the seeds campaign. As transnational corporations are usurping ownership of seeds and manipulating seed genetics, the struggle over seeds has become the struggle for food sovereignty and for the very basics of life itself. Peasant and indigenous women have a long tradition of collecting and protecting seeds, enhancing seed diversity and adaptability.

Throughout the life of La Via Campesina, women have been present and active on every issue and struggle – organizing, marching, confronting the powerful in national and international conferences, suffering arrests and jail, speaking out on important issues. Side by side and in solidarity with the men of La Via Campesina, we bring political analysis, experience and energy to the shared goal of creating a future that is more just, egalitarian, peaceful, ecologically healthy and life-giving.

I have many, many memories of meetings, marches, meals, speeches, negotiations, etc. but the most poignant and amazing of my Via Campesina experiences have been those moments when, despite the hardships, losses and grief, women rise up together to create spaces of beauty and hope. Through song, poetry, theatre and dancing, using symbols and artistry, wearing the clothing of our cultures, speaking our many languages, the shared love of life is revealed and given meaning. These spaces of *mystica* are powerful and rejuvenating.

I believe it is this rejuvenation and hope and diversity and beauty that makes our march forward possible -- and imperative.

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