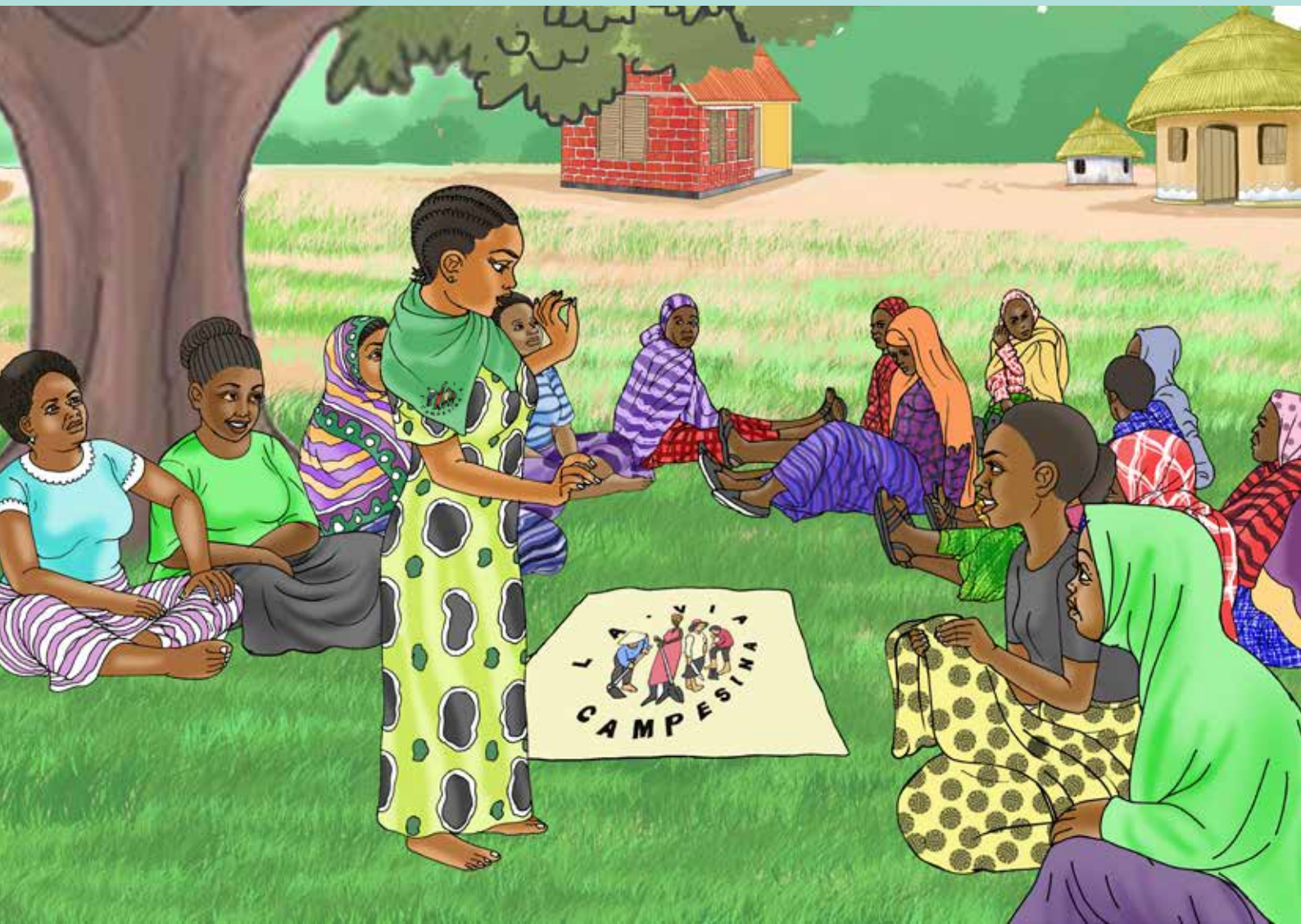


Women peasants are women



Understanding Violence against Rural Women in
Southern and Eastern Africa

Despite our differences in terms of cultures, geographies and environmental conditions between the peasant territories of Eastern and Southern Africa, we, as peasant women, have similar challenges that require our unity and solidarity in addressing them. They include the right to acquire, own and use land; the access to water and social services such as education and health; the commodification of women's bodies; the increasing levels of violence against women and children; the general oppression and neglect of the needs and rights of the peasants. These challenges are compounded by the various forms of structural violence endured by peasant women.

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Introduction

Are women peasants experiencing a particular form of violence simply by being peasants?

In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than 60 percent of working women are smallholder peasants producing nearly three-quarters of food to feed their families and nations. Their livelihoods are intertwined with rural land and territories which are constrained with multiple challenges, including poor infrastructures, lack of access to social services and unfair markets. These problems are not only affecting women's chances of having decent work or having a fair chance to live dignified lives but they are affecting peasants as a social group and rural areas as a space, in terms of production processes, group relationships, and the development of all of the above. To deal with this reality, various forms of struggles and activism have arisen aimed at fighting the relevant injustices against peasants.

To build strong peasant's movements, there is an emerging recognition of the importance of addressing gender inequalities that exist in production and reproduction relations, and thus to strengthen these movements collectively. In the current context women peasants' rights are undermined by capitalism and patriarchy, making them vulnerable to various forms of oppression and exploitation, within peasant groups and as women as a social group.

The study which findings are presented in this brief report is particularly crucial because when feminist groups, women's rights activists, or development agencies, talk about women, the focus has been on resource ownership, accessibility to social services, power dynamics, and financial constraints, issues that are critical, but tend to overshadow Violence Against Women (VAW) in rural settings in the processes of production and reproduction.

The research came at the request of peasant women from La Via Campesina in the Southern

and Eastern Africa region who considered it as essential to document their struggles. The particular focus on peasant women is important in filling the gap left out by the dominant theorization that tends to generalize the experiences of women's oppression and subordination.

A peasant woman from Tanzania stated that

“The point is not to show to what extent women peasants are exploited or oppressed comparing to other women. After all, we are women before being peasants. Perhaps, the most important thing for us is the fact that peasants as a group are oppressed, and within that group, women are further oppressed by patriarchy. So highlighting the double oppression suffered by rural women, caused by geographical set up, cultural systems and capitalism is important”.



The research study aimed at identifying and characterizing the violence against women peasants, bringing their struggles forward in their own voices. This required understanding the position of peasant women, within the social group of peasants and within the social group of women, in which their struggles tend to be shaped and silenced.

A peasant woman from Mozambique argued that:

“Our struggles against capitalism often turn a blind eye to the position of women in the production process. We do not have the right to land or crops as men do, and we are all peasants fighting against land grabbing. Men are fighting not to lose their rights to land, we are fighting not to lose access to land. We don’t have the equitable share of workload with men, and we are all peasants.”

A peasant woman from South Africa had this to say:

“Commonly, our struggle for rural development tends to look at women as one homogeneous group. As such, demands for social change and empowerment approaches for women tend to fight for the rights of women to vote, to be leaders, to be educated and have access to capital. All of these rights are important, but our life’s situation as peasant women and our narrative of being peasants are bound to be different from those of women working in politics, those who are entrepreneurs or those women working in offices. Yes, we need social services and government subsidies, but without addressing gender relations in rural areas, women are less likely to benefit from different programs”

Finally, the research study intended to enrich the definition of VAW, going beyond physical violence, sexual, emotional, and psychological harm.

A peasant woman from Kenya put it this way:

“Commonly VAW is understood as physical violence against women. People might not be able to comprehend that denial to inherit land or to access to income are also forms of violence. As such, writing about women peasant struggles in (re)production perhaps will broaden the definition of violence against women and show its various forms of manifestation”.

The conceptualization of the study was informed by the proposal on Popular and Peasant Feminism from La Via Campesina movement, which aims to strengthen a collective voice of peasants against patriarchy and capitalism, working as women and collectively with men, with the intention of identifying and addressing women’s oppression and exclusion inside and outside the peasant movement. The study was also guided with an awareness that the struggles of peasant women are diverse, therefore, understanding the local context is necessary in building a transformative peasant feminism in southern and eastern Africa.

Main findings

Through the period of collecting and analyzing the data for the study, it was pointed out that most of the existing campaigns against VAW, tend to be generic, with limited voices of women peasants and little representation of women in agricultural contexts. As much as women peasants affirmed sharing many forms of violence with other women groups, further analysis underscored other layers of violence that are specific to women in rural settings. Women peasants argued that the specific exploration studies on violence against women in rural settings could be a useful way of drawing a link between the feminist and peasant movements.

Layers of Violence Experienced

1. The condition of being women

The first layer of violence experienced by peasant women is due to their condition of being women. As many women in the world, they experience oppression and exclusion due to patriarchy. Peasant women members of La Via Campesina Southern and Eastern Africa (LVC SEAf) shared common stories of subordination and oppression through marriage, inheritance, religion and culture.

Women Cannot Inherit the Land- Case from Kenya

A woman was left landless without her knowing. Apparently, her husband sold all the land without telling her. She had no land to cultivate to the point she had to seek for a loan to support her children. She was chased out of the land after the death of her husband, with no place to stay or family to support her, the woman moved out of the village to find other means to support her family. She is still struggling.

With the injury she could no longer farm, and her children were left to tend to themselves.

Women Cannot Ask for Divorce- Case from Tanzania

A woman wanted to leave the husband due to psychical and emotional abuse. Her husband refused. She informed her parents about the abuse and her decision for divorce. Sadly, her father said it was not a woman's place to seek for divorce, if ever, it would be the man asking for one. Later on, the father threatened her with disownment if she continued asking for divorce or speaking on the matter regarding divorce.

Women Cannot Question Men's Actions- Case from Kenya

One day a woman returned to her home to find out her husband had sold 8 sacks of maize and left her with 3. When she questioned her husband about it, she was beaten up. She reported the incident to the elders, who advised them to settle the matter peacefully. Unfortunately, the husband beat her more severely to the point of deforming her leg.

Women Cannot Decide the Number of Children to have- case from Mozambique

Women seem like a machine to produce children. Some men do not want their wives to have birth control. So it seems, the number of children to have in marriage is not a matter for the woman to decide or plan, children are enough if the man says it's enough.

Women Cannot Benefit Equally from the Production of their Labour - Case from Uganda

A woman from my village worked tirelessly in the family garden to ensure she had food to feed her children while the man was busy with other matters. She also provided extra labor apart from gardening to make extra income for her children with little support from the husband. However, when the harvest season arrived, the husband escorted the wife to the market. At the market the husband was busy selling the produce and taking the cash while the wife did the measurements. After the sale, the husband told his wife to hurry home to prepare food for the kids as it was getting late. He stayed behind and came back home drunk and was never held accountable for the money from the household's earnings that he took.

2. The condition of being peasants

The second layer of violence they experience is due to their condition of peasants, by the position of their class in relations of production and reproduction, where their labor is exploited by the prevailing capitalist/ neoliberal economic system. In this regard, participants pointed out a general lack of government support and the presence of greedy financial agents and market forces that are exploitative and destructive to the wellbeing of women in particular and peasant communities as a whole.



The Intersectionality of being Women and Peasants

The specific violence peasant women experience is a result of the intersectionality between the two layers mentioned above: being women and peasants. Women peasants are exposed to specific types of violence that manifest within rural communities and peasant organizations, or that derives from unfair laws and regulations legislated by the state, or from local culture and traditions in general. Respondent women discussed their rights to land (including inheritance), division of labour in the farm and at home, gendered crops, and skewed systems of work and income distribution.

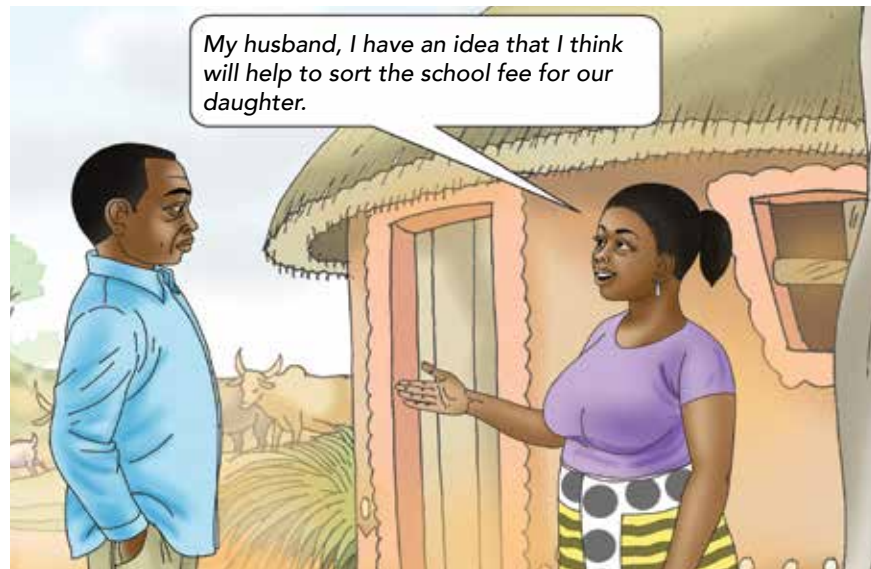
A peasant woman from Zimbabwe stated that:

“It is true that, we peasants are exploited regardless of our gender. It is also true the market does not provide us with the best prices for our crops. It is also true, when the marginal gains of our crops pass through the hands of men, women hardly get a fair share of their labour. Also in peasant movements, women inequalities tend to be overlooked in the name of solidarity against the exploitative nature of markets.”

The research study shows how patriarchy and capitalism intersect to suppress peasant women even further within the group of peasants who are already oppressed and exploited by virtue of their collective class. When peasants are referred to as a group, women’s struggles, their working conditions, and power relations are buried under the class label. Therefore, it is critical to start identifying and documenting the unique violence that is experienced specifically by peasant women in (re)production processes, within and outside the peasant movement. In other words, it is important to understand VAW as a shared experience among women, as a collective gender experience affecting females, as a collective sex, while still seeking to pay particular attention to its manifestation in different groups.

A peasant woman from Tanzania expressed that:

“I feel the word “rural”, gives us a negative identity and position. We are looked down upon together with our husbands and our fellow women. Not because we are less human, but because most of us are poor, less educated, etc. While other women are being empowered, peasant women in rural areas are still struggling for survival, under the triple burden of work and lack of control over their bodies. That is the reality of many peasant women.”



Forms of violence against women peasants

1. Land deprivation

Generally, in rural settings, women do not own land, rather, they have access to land through cultural rights. They are entitled to use the land of their husbands, fathers and brothers for production. However, due to commodification, land owned by a family could easily be sold without the consent of the women from that family, which endangers peasant women's capacity to secure a reliable livelihood and guarantee the food sovereignty of her household.

A peasant woman from South Africa indicated that:

“To me if you take countries labels out, all forms of struggles reported by women from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Kenya, and Tanzania, are similar to the struggles that peasant women in Uganda or South Africa face. Women tend to work hard in farms yet have limited power on selling the crops they produce or the livestock that they raise. It is indeed a harsh reality but to date, access to land for many women depends on their husbands and fathers.”



2. Lack of Permission to Harvest

Generally, men and women work hand in hand during the preparation of a farm and the planting of crops. However, women have to ask for permission to harvest even a small portion of farm produce for domestic use. They do not have the right to harvest without permission.

A peasant woman from Uganda stated that:

“When you look at the farm production chain, women labor cannot be ignored. As a matter of fact, it is the engine of farming. Women and men, plant together. Happily. Women and men weed together. Happily. Women and men harvest together. Happily. But then the income from the harvested crops belongs to men. Ironically, a woman must seek permission to harvest the products of her own labour. At household level, there is no formula or assurance of equitable distribution income — distribution is at the pleasure and mercy of the man who invariably happens to be the head of the household. Some women are lucky, but for most women this is a struggle.”

3. Prohibition to Sell Farm Produce

Generally, the power of selling farm produce is under the control of men and, in some families, income obtained from the sale of farm produce is all spent by the husband.

A peasant woman from Kenya said:

“One woman in Kenya was beaten to the point of being hospitalised, simply because she harvested a bag of maize and gave it to one of her children. When the husband heard of what she did, he got upset and beat her up, saying it is the man who can decide when to harvest and whom to offer farm produce as a gift or a share of the products of family labour.”

4. Gendered Crops

Generally, to ensure household survival, in some cultures of the countries covered by the research, women are allowed to have what is considered women’s crops and livestock. These crops are grown by women for home consumption and men have no control over them. However,

these crops and livestock cannot be the main one of the season in their respective areas, since these last ones are reserved to men as they are bound for commercialization.

5. Invisibility of Domestic Care and Reproduction Tasks

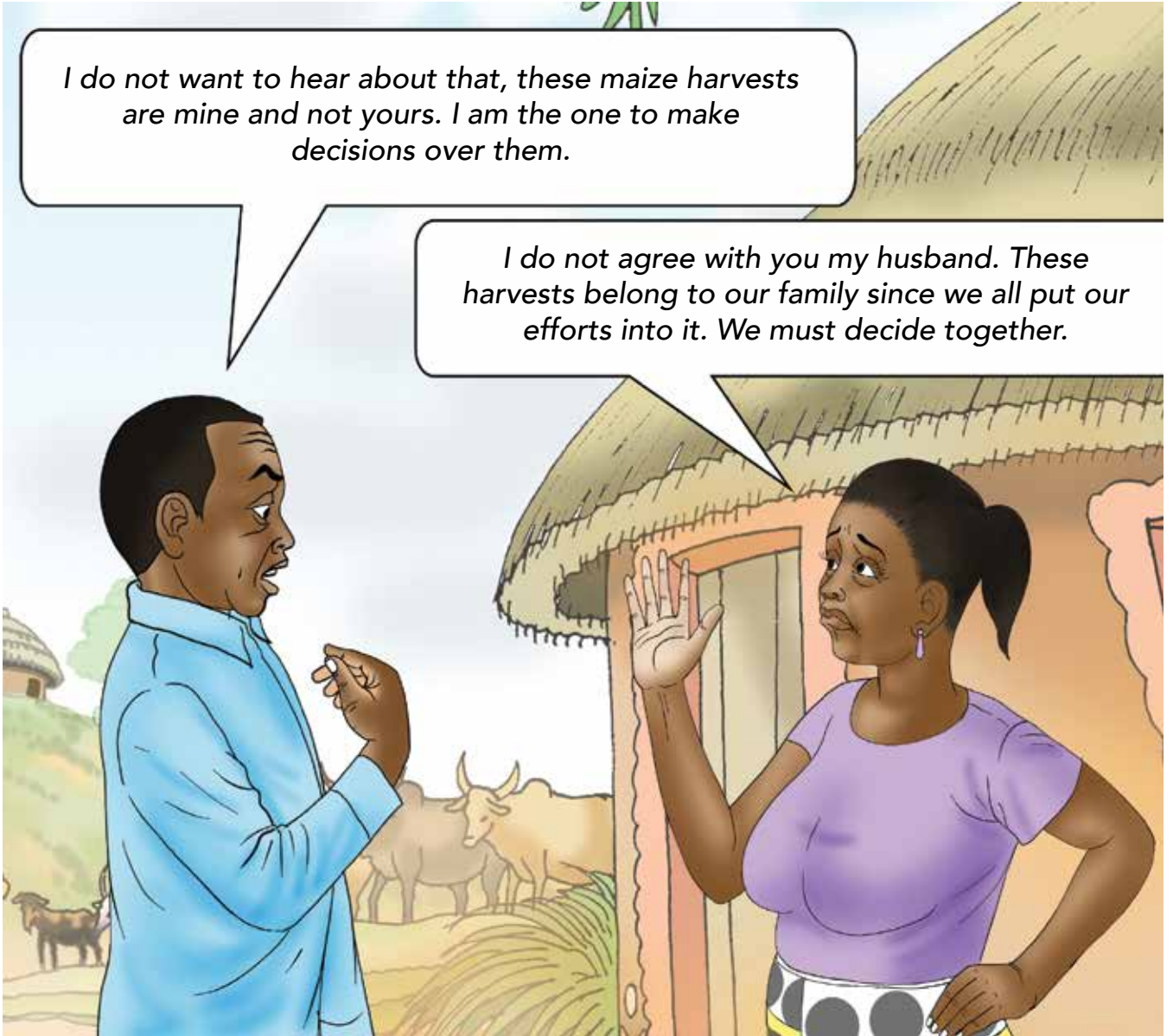
There are limited discussions on how to reduce the burden of unpaid care work on women peasants in line with the overall relations of production and reproduction.

A peasant woman from Zimbabwe complained that:

“With shrinking security to land access, increasing of cost of living, and poor market prices, women’s burden of work is tripling. In Zimbabwe where I was running for a political post, I saw many women working from morning to noon in their farms. Then they would go to other people’s farms to work so they can earn money for their family upkeep. After that, they go home for the third shift of unpaid domestic care work.”

I do not want to hear about that, these maize harvests are mine and not yours. I am the one to make decisions over them.

I do not agree with you my husband. These harvests belong to our family since we all put our efforts into it. We must decide together.



Conclusion

In this study report, the experiences of women peasants in the Southern and Eastern Africa region have been described and accounted for at two levels: first, as women who are small producers under patriarchy and second, as women who belong to a social group called peasants.

The findings of the study indicate that as a distinct social group, peasants suffer their own set of violence. However, there is a need to recognize that the peasant group is not homogeneous. In fact, peasants experience oppression and exploitation in differentiated ways, depending on multiple factors. With that in mind, peasant women should be recognized as a subgroup, where patriarchy and capitalism merge to suppress their rights and exploit their bodies even further.

This report adopts the argument, based on the study findings, that looking at women in agriculture through the lens of only being smallholder producers gives only a partial knowledge of their situation. The concept of “peasant feminism”, has helped us to push the discussion further. Under this conceptual framework, women peasants are analyzed using both class and gender lenses. As we

have explained through the report, besides the violence that women peasants are subjected to as women and as part of the peasant group, they also face specific violence related to their role in production. The two systems, since before the imposition of colonialism until today, still work together to oppress and exploit women in all fields.

Therefore, to defend the rights of women peasants and understand the violations against them, one needs to consider social systems, social structures and processes of production that shape their experiences and their position in society. Violence against women peasants has to be addressed taking into account the need to tackle customary laws, legal frameworks, the production cycle in smallholder farms, the structures of peasant organisations, etc. to actually be able to change the subordinate positions. To advocated for changes, it is vital to fully comprehend the various forms of violence that women are subjected to through research that includes testimonies of women peasant. This will allow to build a more complete picture of their struggles and enrich our comprehension of VAW.

Way Forward

- Building a strong movement for peasant and popular feminism within the La Via Campesina movement in Southern and Eastern Africa and with allies all over the continent. The movement should fight capitalism and patriarchy (as well as imperialism) concurrently.
- Creating spaces for peasants and other social groups to learn about the linkage between capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism.
- Issues of imperialism, including oppression and exploitation since its emergence in Africa, should be integrated in the concept of peasant feminism.
- Bringing the discussions on Popular and Peasant Feminism to women at the grassroots level, involving the community and peasant organisations from local to national level.
- Using local structures such as schools, churches and local government to educate about peasant feminism and gender-based violence as well as its relation to patriarchy and capitalism.
- Advocating for the integration of Peasant feminism in the school curriculum from lower levels of education to influence change in future generations.
- Supporting women, at local, central and organisational level, to take up leadership positions from where they can fight for peasant women’s rights.

Call to action

LVC SEAf calls for organisations, governments and allies to:

- Build unity and solidarity towards the struggles of peasant women at regional, continental and global level by uniting our efforts in ending violence against women and achieving the real liberation of peasant women.
- Continue our discussions in determining who our allies are in the fight against oppressive systems and the construction of Peasant and Popular Feminism.
- Break the silence and build strong strategies to dismantle the oppressive systems through various means of communication and mass direct action.
- Intensify the defense of peasant women's access to and control of land and territory, water and seeds against extractivist 'development', regardless of our race, social class and sexuality.
- Continue to denounce all the ongoing wars, conflicts and enforced migration happening all around the world that leads to increased brutality and suffering of peasant women as well as the militarization of our lives that only benefits the corporate elites.

LVC SEAF Peasant Feminism Initiative

Over the last few years, LVC SEAF has dedicated special attention to give visibility to the struggle of peasant women. Having prioritized the campaign to End Violence Against Women, it was also critical for the movement to understand the situation of peasant women and to develop a means that will help in giving a path to their empowerment. Exploring the proposal of popular peasant feminism as a promising framework to change the reality of inequality in which women peasants live.

For this purpose, between 2019 and 2022, the initiative brought together more than 500 peasant women from Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, D.R Congo, South Africa - as well as some allies from Zambia, Eswatini and Ghana- to contribute to the establishment of the building blocks for an African Peasant feminism and ending the violence against African peasant women in specific.

Through different activities such as national and regional trainings on peasant feminism as well as mobilizations and open discussions on Violence Against Women, peasant women from La Via Campesina organisations in Southern and Eastern Africa were able to share their experiences and life stories, which allowed to collect data for the study which main findings are presented in this report.

The research

This study meant to "put a face" to gender-based violence in the region. With the understanding that in order to build rights, in this case the right of peasant women to live without violence, we need to draw attention to the systematic violence and discrimination that women are suffering, showcasing stories of peasant women in the region and the impacts in their lives and communities.

This first part of the study, focused in four selected countries: Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, although some open discussions at regional level allowed to broaden the story cases and study findings.

Women Peasants versus peasant women

The two terminologies have been used interchangeably throughout this publication purposely. The use of "women peasants" has been used when referring women due to their condition as women, whereas "peasant women" has been used when referring women due to their condition as peasants.

Some important notes on the methodology and limitations of this study

Pandemic Restrictions

The restriction of movement at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic made it impossible for the researcher to travel to the selected four countries (Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe and

Mozambique) and conduct qualitative research as planned. Therefore, data collection was partly restricted to reports of training workshops that were conducted by LVC SEAF. The researcher was able to participate in some activities later implemented such as a regional training in Tanzania that brought together women representatives of all LVC SEAF members and their allies, allowing her to contrast the main findings and capture some more voices and cases of women from other countries, thus extending the initial geographical framework of the research.

The term of Peasant and Popular Feminism

The term feminism itself found to be viewed as a cumbersome term in rural communities and not existing in some African languages. Peasant and Popular Feminism is a proposal from peasant women themselves being used as a tool for movement building and to understand violence against women peasants. The workshops were used to introduce women peasants the concepts of feminism and patriarchy and to discuss on their understanding and identification with these concepts.

Workshops vs. research sites

Finally, it should be noted that the workshops and other activities were not designed as research sites, but rather as open spaces where women could learn about VAW and share their experiences on violence as rural women. Nevertheless, the researcher used these moments and the reports from the workshops to collect further data on VAW.



Southern and Eastern Africa

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