

Critical Perspectives on Governance and Social Security Systems

Feminist Lessons from Brazil's Urban Food Systems

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In Maracanaú, Ceará, women's participation in fairs is highly encouraged, especially indigenous women who partake of this commercial space. © Drawlio Joca

Introduction

The aim of this essay is to contribute to a critical analysis, from a feminist perspective and in the Brazilian context, of food policies, focusing in urban and peri-urban contexts. It investigates whether such policies, although being sensitive to the gender debate on food systems, still reproduce the division of productive and reproductive labour referenced in patriarchy while pointing out for alternative policies that are grounded in a comprehensive feminist perspective, within the Latin American feminist debates.

Recent debates on food security and sovereignty have increasingly used intersectional analyses to identify the subjects and multifactorial conditions of food systems. There are at least two main reasons for undertaking such analyses. The first is due to the endemic gender, income and race inequality of global FNS indicators. The second is the essential role played by those who struggle hardest to realise their full rights to healthy and adequate food –

women, blacks, the poor and people at the periphery – in guarantying food security within patriarchal food system structures.

This paradox occurs to a greater or lesser extent all over the world. In Brazil, black women are the group of people most affected by poverty and hunger, according to a major survey published in 2022 (Rede PENSSAN, 2022). At the same time, they are those most deeply involved in reproductive and productive labour activities in families and community nuclei, working to guarantee the minimum conditions for nutrition and survival.

In Brazil, numerous government policies address food security, with women the main target. Some of these policies have been developed based on differing degrees of women's involvement in their design, implementation and monitoring, and have shown differing results in terms of their impact on women's lives and on its capacity in tackling gender inequalities or addressing women's needs.

This text seeks to contribute to the debate on the intersections between food systems and gender. It is part of a discourse that seeks to advance and qualify the gender perspective on public policies and the transformation of food systems. While this issue has already been addressed in various reports, the authors felt that a more in-depth study was needed based on empirical evidence

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about the application of a feminist approach to the design of public food policies. Although many international reports on food policy have included gender considerations in their analyses, most lack a dedicated focus on the critical deepening of the nexus of food policy and gender. For example, the latest report of the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE)⁴ points to the importance of urban and peri-urban agriculture, as well as representative diversity in municipal governance, as essential elements of food policy. However, it does not specifically identify the lack of women's participation in diagnostic, implementation, or monitoring mechanisms, nor does it provide examples of how this can be overcome in local and national contexts.

This text is based on practical experience of food policy work carried out in Brazilian municipalities and does not represent an exhaustive study of this subject, but rather an indication of where future research should converge. Brazil has a history of implementing food policies with an internationally recognised impact. At the time of writing, Brazil holds the presidency of the G20, where it has made the fight against hunger and poverty one of its priorities, strengthening its position as a protagonist in the global food agenda.

Following the Brazilian context as a point of departure and working with the lens of Latin American feminist theory, we here develop a guiding argument for a scenario in which food policies achieve already succeeded and are recognized in its capacity to fight for food and nutritional security. This must be first acknowledged, as an achievement of decades that now allows us to envisage decision-making processes that can still find room for more inclusive and attentive to the debates promoted by feminist social movements and women's political organisations seeking to guarantee food sovereignty for their communities and play a decisive part in the diagnosis, design, implementation and monitoring phases of food policy.

⁴ The HLPE is an auxiliary body of the UN Committee on World Food Security, which publishes an annual report of technical analysis and public policy recommendations on different themes. In 2023, the chosen theme for HLPE-FSN #19 report was "Strengthening urban and peri urban food systems to achieve food security and nutrition, in the context of urbanization and rural transformation." (HLPE, 2024)

New Paradigms, the production of living and food sovereignty

The production of living and food sovereignty

Latin American feminism, as pointed out in the reflections of Gonzalez (González, 2020), has contributed enormously to the analysis of the structuring dimensions of the conquest of autonomy and the search for equality based on the collective organisation of women and their leadership in the territories, demonstrating their central role in the production of living and care work, both in rural communities and in peripheral urban areas. Besides scrutinising structural causes and identifying processes implemented by women, Latin American feminism has also proposed alternatives to the hegemonic patriarchal and capitalist model. Feminist economics conceptualization derives from those alternative perspectives, and according to Sandra Quintela (Quintela, 2006), it has questioned, for over 20 years, the crystallisation of gender roles and the devaluation of all work socially determined as being feminine, by studying and measuring the production of wealth and income, often non-monetary, that comes from women's work and which is rendered invisible by the sexual division of labour in society.

According to Vandana Shiva (Shiva, 2020) women produce food and the conditions for the survival of their families, their children and the surrounding community through their relationship with nature's common goods. As Julieta Paredes (Guzmán Arroyo & Paredes, 2014) posits in her analysis of community feminism, this also means taking a leading role in defending everything that affects the well-being of these communities, being recognised as leaders, and sometimes suffering threats.

From the productive work of women, it is possible to identify a qualitative difference between *food security* and *food sovereignty*. The latter term was coined by La Via Campesina (6) and is defined as the autonomy and decision-making power of peoples to choose which food to produce and consume, in line with food culture and agroecology.

Family and peasant farming and agroecology

A few decades ago, when the global scenario of food and nutritional insecurity and its causes began to be known and researched in a more in-depth and systematic way, the mechanisms involved in food production and access also began to be verified, reflected in the most recent State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) report of the UN Food and Agriculture organization (FAO) (FAO et al., 2023). Family farming is fundamental in guarantying Brazil's food security and places an important role in rural economies and overall production practices. Although not being consensual the total contribution of smallholder family farming for the total food intake of Brazilians, it is recognised that family farming takes a big role on guarantying food security in the country. Its contribution results from its direct role in producing food for consumption but also from the role of family farming in guarantying the livelihood of rural population. According to IBGE, from all production units in the country 76,8% are of family farmers (IBGE, 2021), comprising 67% of all rural active producers (CONTAG, 2024). However, family farming practices only use 23% of all productive land, with big scale agribusiness (oriented mainly towards production of commodities) concentrating most of the land property. (IBGE, 2021). At this point it is worth taking a closer look at the production model proposed by agroecology, which, although not the predominant model in Brazil, is an important alternative aimed at achieving food sovereignty.



The city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais supports a network of women farmers, associations and civil society to produce food and strengthen short marketing circuits with less waste and lower costs. ©Patrícia Nogueira

According to Miguel Altieri (Altieri, 2012), agroecology emerged as a counterpoint to the dominant production system forged in the Green Revolution, which proved to be socially exclusionary and environmentally unsustainable, denying the population full access to food and the natural commons necessary for its production. Agroecology defends the paradigm of food sovereignty and the human right to access healthy and sustainably produced food, placing people living in situations of food insecurity at the centre of food policies.

The practice of agroecology in rural and urban contexts (or in the urban-rural continuum) reveals material and political possibilities for exercising food sovereignty and the transformation of production and consumption models. The debate on the global food agenda has increasingly highlighted the opportunity that lies in agroecology as a production model capable of simultaneously guaranteeing food security, expanding the agency of individuals, decentralising power in food systems, and preserving or regenerating agrobiodiversity. In short, it is a system that supports biodiversity and guarantees human rights within planetary limits (IPES-Food & ETC Group, 2021).

Structuring policies for the feminist agenda vs gender-sensitive policies

As Nobre, Faria and Moreno (Moreno et al., 2020) have shown, the convergence of women's experiences, within a feminist economy perspective, has been able to elucidate and distinguish policies that are structural to the feminist agenda, while also recognising the political actors that guarantee the production of living for food and nutritional security and sovereignty. In Brazil, the *March of the Margaridas*⁵ (Marcha das Margaridas, 2023) considers that for women, the 'good living'⁶ is a collective, integral and harmonious experience with nature and its common goods, as opposed to the violence of a

⁵ The March of the Margaridas (Marcha das Margaridas) is a women's movement named in honour of the peasant rights activist and trade unionist Margarida Maria Alves, who was murdered for defending her land and way of life. Every four years, this movement mobilises women from the farmland, forest and waterscapes, promoting debates in all regions of Brazil, and meeting to discuss the most relevant agendas for women and to propose policies that address their demands.

⁶ The Latin American concept of *bem-viver* or 'good living' emerged from Indigenous knowledge systems and focuses on living sustainably as a member of a human community and as part of the natural world.

predatory development model based on exploitation and the accumulation of wealth. It considers that policies and actions related to the food agenda must confront the crystallisation of gender roles and the possibilities for women to guide the political agenda as rights holders and with practice and experience accumulation.

On the other hand, considering the gradual transformation and complexification of public food policies, one can identify policy initiatives that are sensitive to gender in their design and implementation, but do not question or reverse the roles assigned to women by patriarchal and capitalist society. Some of these policies have had a considerable impact on the fight for the right to food and nutritional security and are highly relevant to the debate on transforming food systems, but when viewed through a Latin American feminist lens and the debate on 'good living' and food sovereignty, they still fail to address or influence the foundations of gender inequality or may even reinforce them. In countries and localities where gender sensitivity has been structurally integrated into food policy, there may be an opportunity for qualifying the gender-food debate and reflect on the greatest possible deepening of political thinking and action in terms of guaranteeing women's rights and their social function in the production of living. As Ricardo Abramovay stated, "the fight against hunger must be understood as a starting point, not a point of arrival"⁷ in the sense that food and nutritional security must be qualified in terms of social justice, the protection and regeneration of biodiversity, and a whole list of systemic damages caused by the hegemonic food model.

⁷ Speech by Professor Ricardo Abramovay at a G20 side event in Rio de Janeiro on 5 September 2024. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0b_DNI9w44. Accessed on 12 September 2024.

Womens's role in food policies – national and municipal examples

To illustrate the references and reflections mentioned above, we have provided some examples of public food policies and government initiatives aimed at women that were developed by national and municipal governments. Some of them may be considered structurally drafted from a feminist perspective as they place women at the centre of their implementation and relate directly to the challenges of overcoming gender inequality and the invisibility of women's social roles and needs. Other policies may be categorised as gender-sensitive, in the sense that they have an impact on food and nutrition security and place women as the object of the policy, but do not confront socially crystallised gender roles. In other words, the former point to the possibility of qualifying the debate on food sovereignty by incorporating a feminist approach, while the latter may be fundamental to guaranteeing food and nutrition security, even if they do not go far enough from a feminist perspective and do not question the structural basis of a patriarchal system.

March of the Margaridas – towards food sovereignty and womens's protagonism as policymakers

For 24 years, the *March of the Margaridas* in Brazil has been building a successful experience of women taking a leading role in proposing, demanding and implementing public food policies. In the preparatory meetings and the general meeting of the march, the challenges and experiences of these women in the production of life are identified, and proposals are drafted for public authorities, either as projects to be funded or proposals for public policies. In 2023, the March mobilised more than 100,000 women in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, and in its closing day the federal government signed eight decrees proposed by the movement. Four of these decrees concerned (i) the creation of a national commission to combat violence in the countryside, (ii) a national citizenship and well-being programme for rural women, (iii) a programme aimed at rural youth, and (iv) a programme of productive backyards to strengthen agro-ecological production by women and its marketing.

The proposed decrees gave rise to public policies forged from the demands of peasant women, demonstrating the capacity to develop policies aimed at guaranteeing good living, food sovereignty and questioning gender roles and the unequal structural roles of women and men in society. The decrees that emerged from the March are based on women's protagonism and propose action to foster their autonomy and strengthen the social role of women in their communities, the generation of income and financial autonomy, and the reduction of violence and inequality. These are policies built on the basis of the Latin American and peasant feminist struggle, unequivocal examples of the immense opportunity that lies in processes of political construction involving women. In this process, women become the subjects of the policy, participating in its design, implementation and monitoring.

Bolsa família – a gender-sensitive guarantee of food and nutrition security

The Bolsa Família programme⁸ is one of the Brazilian government's best-known and most effective initiatives to mitigate food and nutritional insecurity. The programme, institutionalised in 2004, is a national and international benchmark, with a major impact on guaranteeing food and nutrition security in the country. It connects social assistance policies, food security, education, public health, and the generation of data on its architecture and implementation process, on a comprehensive and integrated policy design with several positive impacts.

Twenty years after its creation, Bolsa Família has once again proven to be a fundamental tool for tackling food and nutritional insecurity that Brazil has been plunged into in recent years and which has led it back onto the world hunger map.

The programme was designed to be gender-sensitive, in that it prioritises women who are mothers and heads of household, allocating a sum of money proportional to the number of their children, and making the transfer conditional on school attendance and vaccination of the children. Women are the main beneficiaries of the resource because they are primarily responsible for looking after children, ensuring access to food, maintaining hygiene in the family home, and monitoring their children's health. The sums transferred by Bolsa Família are therefore paid to women-mothers, and this is considered to be one of the most important factors in its success. By prioritising mothers, it is sensitive to the gender issue, but from the point of view of the role socially attributed to women, that the programme does not question, of care and reproductive responsibility. Even if not tackling the patriarchy system yet, its impact has effectively led Brazil to guarantee the human right to food.

Urban food policies and gender – examples from Brazilian cities

While national-level governments can influence feminist-based policies with an impact on the whole territory, at the municipal level cities have an enormous contribution to make in guaranteeing the implementation of these policies. They also often have greater capacity to innovate in their design, being able to configure policies in a way that protagonises women.

One important approach that municipalities can take is to promote debate on agroecology in urban areas. Policies focused on women agroecological producers can help to strengthen their practices while questioning socially determined gender roles. Placing women as protagonists as producers and sellers has a direct impact on their financial autonomy, with consequences for combating violence and recognising their social function beyond caring and reproductive work (which is socially attributed to them). It points towards a food policy centred on rights, including the human right to food.

⁸ Bolsa Família (lit. *Family Allowance*) is a cash transfer programme run by the Brazilian federal government. It was established under the administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva by Provisional Measure 132 of 20 October 2003, and became law on 9 January 2004 as Federal Law No. 10.836

Strategies focused on agroecological production in urban spaces can have different configurations and designs within municipal policy. At this point, we will highlight some successful policies focused on women as agroecological food producers in urban spaces. These were designed and implemented by cities participating in the LUPPA programme⁹ These policies contribute to women's and their families' food and nutritional security, while also generating income from commercialised production. Cities have various possibilities for promoting agroecological production, and in the case of the cities participating in LUPPA, we have listed some locally implemented initiatives¹⁰ (Comida do Amanhã & ICLEI América do Sul, 2022, 2023):

- ▶ **Develop infrastructure for women's participation inside and outside the communities and territories where the policies are implemented.** This is the case in Maracanaú, Ceará, where women's participation in fairs is highly encouraged, especially indigenous women who partake of this commercial space.
- ▶ **Facilitate access to mechanisms, equipment and inputs for agroecological production.** The city of Vitória do Mearim, Maranhão, has implemented various initiatives related to food systems led by women, both to preserve genetic heritage and food culture and to encourage and support family farming.
- ▶ **Prioritise public procurement from agro-ecological production, ensuring some financial security for women producers.** The municipality of Jaguaratama, Ceará, runs food production programmes aimed at women farmers and beekeepers, and through the PAA¹¹ and PNAE¹² public procurement programmes it guarantees income generation and the appreciation of women's work in local food production.

⁹ LUPPA (Urban Laboratory for Public Food Policies) is a collective platform that facilitates the construction of integrated, participatory municipal food policies with a systemic approach, coordinated by the Comida do Amanhã Institute in partnership with ICLEI Brazil. Find out more at luppa.comidadoamanha.org

¹⁰ All the data on the LUPPA cities presented in the text was taken either from the cities' participation in the 3rd Urban Laboratory, or from the Cadernos LUPPA 1 and 2, which summarise LUPPA's work in editions 1 and 2. Find out more by accessing Cadernos LUPPA 1 and 2 at: <https://luppa.comidadoamanha.org/biblioteca/>

¹¹ PAA is the acronym for Food Acquisition Programme, a Brazilian government programme that makes direct purchases of food from family farmers, without the need for a bidding process, and donates this food to people in situations of food and nutritional insecurity, as well as to the social assistance network, public food and nutritional security facilities, and the public and philanthropic education network. Available at <https://www.gov.br/secom/pt-br/aceso-a-informacao/comunicar/lista-de-aco-es-e-programas/programa-de-aquisicao-de-alimentos-paa>

- ▶ **Train women both in technical production and in legal and bureaucratic instruments and rules so that they are better able to commercialise their produce.** The city of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais supports a network of women farmers, associations and civil society to produce food and strengthen short marketing circuits with less waste and lower costs.
- ▶ **Encourage women to organise themselves into productive groups and/or cooperatives in order to strengthen themselves as a collective, expanding the possibilities for marketing and mutual support.** The municipality of Barcarena, Pará is notable for its public food policies aimed at women and for its circular development. The city hosts solidarity economy fairs whose participants are 70% women artisans and family farmers, positioning women as the main protagonists in the production and commercialisation processes of family farming.
- ▶ **Design policies and programmes to combat gender-based violence, integrating other dimensions of the feminist struggle into local policies.** The city of Sobral, Ceará has created structures to prevent and combat violence against women. The Casa de Proteção da Mulher Cearense [House of Protection for Women of Ceará] provides training to develop economic activities in partnership with cooperatives and the para-state public service organisations SESC, SENAI, and SEBRAE.

These policies are an example of how the urban food agenda can be an instrument of women's emancipation and protagonism, authorising the questioning of roles historically attributed to them and repositioning them as central agents in the process of diagnosing, designing, implementing and monitoring policies. These policies that promote food sovereignty make clear the central role of cities in advancing the guarantee of rights, demonstrating how the right to food is connected to women's rights to social participation and to play a leading role in political decisions.

¹² PNAE is the acronym for the National School Feeding Programme, a Brazilian government programme that provides federal funding to assist students enrolled in all stages and modalities of basic education with the aim of contributing to the growth and biopsychosocial development, learning, school performance and the formation of healthy eating habits of students, through food and nutrition education actions and the provision of meals that cover their nutritional needs during the school term. It has a public procurement mechanism where the federal government (through FNDE) transfers money to municipalities to guarantee school feeding to every child, obliging that 30% of all food served is produced by family farmers. <https://www.gov.br/fnde/pt-br/aceso-a-informacao/aco-es-e-programas/programas/pnae>

Reflection: food policies, governance and gender

The Latin American feminist discourse and the production of living, articulated in the critical and reflective analysis of food policies, reveals the difference between gender-sensitive policy approaches and policy approaches that emerge from the feminist discourse. The former may be successful in reducing severe and moderate food insecurity, even if they are not feminist-based initiatives, either in the sense of strengthening women's self-determination or questioning socially established gender roles, by reproducing structures of division of productive and reproductive labour embedded in the patriarchal model of society.

The latter, on the other hand, are the result of women taking a leading role in forming policies and questioning structures that alter unequal gender relations, showing that the world can be transformed when we change women's lives, and vice versa.

In the Latin American context, and more specifically in Brazil, women's participation in food policies is mediated by social mobilisation and collective self-organisation. Their in-depth knowledge of the complex realities of each territory makes them essential agents in the diagnosis, creation, implementation, and monitoring of food policies.

In municipal contexts, some food policies make use of female protagonism as a way to deconstruct their central role as carers, placing them at the centre of emancipatory initiatives and empowering them to implement policies, providing financial autonomy and strengthening their organisational participation through policies and experiences that are gender-equal and crafted in the feminist discourse, not merely gender-sensitive. The positive impacts of these policies on women's lives range from the symbolic deconstruction of inequality between male and female roles, with a direct impact on the reduction of gender violence, to strengthening financial autonomy and social participation. To consolidate these and other initiatives for women, it is important to consider their specific needs and challenges, adapting the creation and operation of municipal governance mechanisms and tools to the specificities of women's lives, ensuring that these are incorporated into policy creation processes right from conception.



In Maracanaú, Ceará, women's participation in fairs is highly encouraged, especially indigenous women who partake of this commercial space. © Helene Santos

Conclusions

Our analysis indicates that some successful policies are gender-sensitive, delivering unique results that guarantee the population's food and nutritional security. At the same time, there are also public food policies based on feminist struggles, aligned with the concept of 'good living' and the principles of agroecology, which challenge established gender roles and historical and structural gender inequality.

This analytical differentiation is proposed as a way of understanding how different understandings of women's agency translate into different public policy approaches, even though both are explicitly designed with a gender focus. Table 1 summarises the main characteristics identified in these two categories. This essay does not seek to categorise specific policies as belonging to one or the other approach, since the approaches are not dichotomous and can certainly be coexistent or complementary in certain components of public policy. However, we suggest that future research could use this distinction to more clearly identify the agency factor in gendered food policies.

Although gender-sensitive policies are fundamental to guaranteeing food and nutrition security and the human right to healthy and adequate food, policies that emerge from the feminist agenda and women's political and practical actions and struggles to end gender inequality and ensure food security for their communities, centre women as protagonists in the design of the policy and its implementation.

Policies based on inclusive governance models, anchored in feminism and agroecology, and considering the demands of social movements and the practical experiences of women, point the way towards guaranteeing food sovereignty.

Food policies designed with and by women can help in questioning and overcoming structures and roles that are crystallised in gender inequality. They may point to the possibility of re-equalising the care burdens historically placed on women's shoulders and prioritising their leading role in the design of food policies and programmes.

Even though national policies can have a very significant impact at local level, municipalities play a key role in formulating and implementing food policies that incorporate the feminist approach.

The Latin American feminist debate reveals possibilities for qualifying public food policy. Brazil, in particular, has a track record of developing coherent and impactful food policies, at national and local levels, with examples not only of gender-sensitive policies aimed at guaranteeing food and nutritional security, but also policies built on the social mobilisation of women that aim to realise the vision of food and nutritional sovereignty and gradually overcome structural gender inequalities.

	The role of women in politics	Women's agency	Macro objective	Gender roles
Food policies based on a feminist approach	Women as political thinkers and proposers	Policy subjects	Achieving food sovereignty	Questions and challenges crystallised gender roles
Gender-sensitive food policies	Women who benefit from the policy	Object of the policy	Ensuring food security	Mitigates impacts of established gender roles

Table 1: The main characteristics of the two categories: gender-sensitive food policies and food policies based on a feminist approach

About

Urban Food Futures is a Science-with-Society programme. With hubs in Nairobi, Kenya and Cape Town, South Africa, our research is focused on informal settlements and low-income urban neighbourhoods that are largely locked out of formal service provision and governance structures. With informality as the connecting thread, we explore pathways to transform food systems and realise the right to food for all.

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