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Women

Women of the world's largest peasant movement call the shots

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Zubaidah Tambunan is one feisty grandmother. She has gone to outrageous measures to protect Aek Nagaga, her Sumatran agricultural village that is consistently threatened by foreign land-grabbing palm oil investors. She has lain in roads leading to local plantations to physically halt foreign corporations and collaborating local police, implemented a village-wide system to warn of their approach, and advocated for agrarian reform in Indonesia.

This week at the IV International Women's Assembly of the Via Campesina in Jakarta, Indonesia, Zubaidah was far from alone in her efforts. In a fiery speech, she encouraged women from 76 countries representing at least 150 Via Campesina member organizations to join forces and never give up when leading the struggle for their historical rights to land and its resources. She knows from experience: in her village of 1,700, more than 1,300 residents are active in campaigns for agrarian reform—and 70% of those activists are women and members of the Indonesian Peasant Union (SPI).

Success stories like Zubaidah's are possible in part because of Via Campesina's recognition of and efforts to address a fundamental dichotomy in the agrarian community: even though women produce roughly 70% of the world's food, the voice of agriculture is predominately patriarchal. Via Campesina became aware that this was an issue within its own organization as well leading up to its international organizing conference in Bangalore in 2000, when the International Coordinating Committee realized that its dedication to equality existed more on paper than it did in practice. The Committee opened that gathering with a women's assembly—and has done so at each international conference since, including the present one in Jakarta. A central tenet of Via Campesina's mission is its commitment to female participation.

"The women's assemblies are grounds not just for training, but also for legitimacy," offered Nettie Wiebe, a Canadian peasant, founding member of Via Campesina, and the first female to sit on its International Coordinating Committee. "We have a history of being marginalized and excluded in public spaces. So it is crucial for us to hear each other and speak one another into confidence." Today, thanks in part to the women's assemblies, there is total gender parity among Via Campesina's leadership: each member region elects one female and one male delegate to represent it at the international level.

Therein lies what differentiates Via Campesina from other agrarian movements. It serves as a model for social movements by linking agrarian reform with women's advocacy to attain a fair place in society.

This strategy has worked as evidenced by the fact that some of the Via Campesina's most profound achievements have been won at the hands of women. Ever since the movement coined the term food sovereignty—asserting people's rights to define their own food and agricultural policies—women have played a key role in making it a reality in their communities.

One example is the Korean Women's Peasant Association (KWPA), a Via Campesina member that is more than 30,000 members strong, which accepted the Food Sovereignty Prize in New York City in October 2012.

Highly industrialized South Korea employs less than six percent of its population in agriculture, and increasingly relies on patented seeds, low wages, and forced labor. Since much of its farmland has been taken over by the high-tech sector, the South Korean government grabs cheap land elsewhere—often in African countries like Madagascar. Like their African sisters, the women of KWPA strategically oppose these actions through the Via Campesina.

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Locally, they have created a practice of food sovereignty within the framework of women's rights—and local governments are starting to copy it. KWPA's sister farmers' program provides hands-on training, linking the women to both local cooperatives and consumers. Together with national allies (including the Korean Peasant League, another Via Campesina member), KWPA formed the National Campaign Task Force to defend food sovereignty. "We are creating a new world where women farmers are respected—from planting, to harvest, to the marketplace," explained Kang Da Bog, a rice farmer and current president of KWPA. "The very meaning of food sovereignty implies our right to determine our identities," she added.

A key articulation of both food sovereignty and agrarian reform is an end to violence against women. At the last Via Campesina international gathering in Maputo in 2008, the movement launched the Global Campaign to Stop Violence Against Women. That campaign had been three years in the works with the Dominican Republic-based National Confederation of Women Farmers (CONAMUCA). Training and education within local movements is at the heart of the campaign, for men as well as women.

"One of the biggest problem facing women of the world is violence," said Juana Ferrer Paredes, Global Campaign to Stop Violence Against Women's campaign architect and current coordinator. "Via Campesina strives for the rights of workers in the countryside. We cannot advance in our process of struggle without having one point of that fight be putting a stop to violence against women," she added. In the last five years, the campaign has grown from its Caribbean origins to international actions on five continents. Juana has high hopes that in the coming years, it will take place in each country in which Via Campesina works.

While Via Campesina raises its colorful banners again in Jakarta, the women among its leadership are highly organized to advance the agenda. They have proved that they are ready to do whatever it takes—even if it means laying down in front of a truck.

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