



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

# IJDR

*International Journal of Development Research*

Vol. 12, Issue, 03, pp. 54425-54429, March, 2022

<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.24149.03.2022>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

## REMANSO WOMEN'S NETWORK AND PUBLIC POLICIES IN THE SEMIARID REGION OF BAHIA: CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE AND MANAGEMENT OF AGROECO SYSTEMS TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUITY AND WOMEN'S AUTONOMY

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 20<sup>th</sup> January, 2022  
Received in revised form  
29<sup>th</sup> January, 2022  
Accepted 07<sup>th</sup> February, 2022  
Published online 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2022

#### Key Words:

Agroecology. Family Agriculture.  
Living in the Semiarid. Feminism.

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### ABSTRACT

Gender inequalities are part of a historical reality in the countryside, the city and the different socio-environmental contexts in Brazil. In the whereabouts of the Brazilian semiarid region, popular initiatives and public policies have emerged in the search for the valorization of women's knowledge in the context of agroecosystems and the overcoming of gender issues and equity promotion. Thus, this work aimed to systematize and analyze the local knowledge about the semiarid agroecosystems managed by women farmers who are members of the Network of Women of Remanso, Bahia, Brazil. It is found that in the last two decades with the access to public policies they had a positive impact on the lives of women who are part of the Women's Network, helped them to recognize their knowledge and fortified the agroecological transition experiences led by women, expanding the strategies of the stock culture, in addition to the promotion of technologies of water storage for human consumption, food production and for the reproduction and conservation of native seeds. The horizontal exchange of knowledge in the management of agrobiodiversity and other strategies guaranteed the conservation of genetic resources and sustainability for the agroecosystems formed in this region of the semiarid region of Bahia. However, even with these achievements and recognition of the knowledge already evidenced through the action of women's networks, there is still much to advance in order to ensure gender equality and full citizenship for women living in rural areas.

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Citation: Márcia Maria Pereira Muniz, Erilva Machado Costa, Rosimeire Morais Cardeal Simão, Ana Elisabeth Cavalcanti Santa Rita, David Fernandes Lima, Daniel Salgado Pifano and Helder Ribeiro Freitas. "Remanso women's network and public policies in the semiarid region of bahia: construction of knowledge and management of agroeco systems to promote gender equity and women's autonomy", *International Journal of Development Research*, 12, (03), 54425-54429.

## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on the research of the first author's master's degree carried out in the *Programa de Pós-graduação em Extensão Rural – PPGEXR da Universidade Federal do Vale do São Francisco – UNIVASF*, which aimed to analyze what the extent of how public policies have contributed to the strengthening of agroecological-based experiences within the proposal of coexistence with the Semiarid and Agroecology, reflecting and analyzing the local knowledge related to agroecosystems managed by women. For this, it was also pursued to elucidate how public policies collaborate with the process of autonomy and empowerment of women and the contribution of the Women's Network in the self-organization of women farmers, supporting women's groups and constituting a space for technical

training and making political feminist militancy in order to expand knowledge and overcome gender inequalities present in their lives. Women have always played an important role in the construction and conservation of agrobiodiversity, food and nutritional security, health and environmental sustainability in different territories through diverse historical and socio-environmental contexts. However, it is also observed that gender inequalities in family farming still present themselves as obstacles to rural development, manifesting in the daily lives of farmers, especially in the distribution of income generated by family labor, the lack of participation in decision-making processes and presence in spaces of sociability, leisure and access to information. For Butto (2011, p. 12), "the rural economy has always been marked by the sexual division of labor. Men are associated with economic activities that generate employment, occupation, and income, while women focus on activities aimed at family self-

consumption". The analysis of gender inequalities "must take into account the poor living conditions and limited access to public policies in rural areas, especially in the poorest regions of the country, which particularly affect rural women, further deepening gender-specific inequalities. (Heredia & Cintrão, 2006, p. 2). The authors also point out that the lack of water supply is the element of infrastructure that has the most consequences for the work of women living in rural areas, considering that, generally, it is up to them to fetch water to supply their homes and that the lack of water makes it difficult to carry out domestic activities. When researching the organizational process of the Remanso Women's Network, it was necessary to broaden the view, introducing new approaches, such as feminist analysis that propose new questions to understand the multiple dimensions related to gender inequalities and its relationship with society, and its tensions related to the invisibility of the work done by women. Picchi (2012) draws a dividing line between gender analysis and feminist analysis, but recognizes that this process is neither easy nor automatic: "Gender economics, in my opinion, generally faces the difficult task of describing the inequalities that exist between women and men within a pre-established analytical framework, without questioning how such a theoretical framework explains the inequalities. (Picchi, 2012, p. 15) In agriculture there is a clear division of labor, roles, and responsibilities that are associated with gender conditions; therefore, women are responsible for the care and domestic tasks of the house, fetching water from the reservoirs and dams, maintenance and management of the biodiversity of the backyards, while men work in the fields. "Rural women, besides resisting the adversities of environmental conditions and living power relations expressed in the concentration of land, face gender subordination relations in the private/domestic sphere and in the public sphere." (Oliveira, 2004, p. 01). Siliprandi & Cintrão (2015), also recognize that besides family farming, women develop work at home (domestic work), and also participate in agricultural work, this way they are involved in various production activities in the family unit, such as soil preparation, planting, crop care and harvesting. In addition, women use the space in their backyards to produce food, such as fruit, vegetables, medicinal herbs, and small animals. As these activities are performed concomitantly with other tasks, agricultural work performed by women is seen as an extension of domestic work, and is not counted in monetary terms, but its products impact the family's income, either by consumption or commercialization. "Their direct access to money is often hindered by the fact that their work is considered 'help' and those activities that are under their direct responsibility generate fewer resources". (Cintrão & Siliprandi, 2011, p. 189).

The defense of their rights and the struggle to combat inequalities between men and women structured by the capitalist and patriarchal system boosted the self-organization of women in rural areas who began to question and claim their economic and social rights. Butto (2011, p. 14) points out that "at the end of the 1980s, the performance of rural women gains more strength, in the fight for their statement as farmers, as political subjects that question the existing power relations in the rural environment". She also specifies that in the mid-80s and in the 90s, the main claims revolved around equal rights to access to land, access to social security, and recognition as women farmers, including their participation in the union movement and their recognition as producers within the family unit, and seeking to enable their equal access to public policies for family farming. In recent years, women and their organizations have started to claim with greater emphasis their insertion in productive activities focused mostly on access to credit, commercialization policies and specialized technical assistance, in addition to seeking visibility to the various forms of social reproduction of family farming and the contribution of women's work to improve food and nutritional security of families, also highlighting the relationship between gender and agroecology, associated with women's work in sustainable management and conservation of biodiversity. Starting from 2003 with a new institutional environment that was favorable to dialogue and the incorporation of the demands proposed by women, causing significant changes in their lives, it was from that government that "...for the first time a comprehensive public policy was developed to promote

objective gender equality and that spaces for dialogue with civil society were clearly established, including the agenda of economic and political rights of rural women workers. (Butto, 2011, p. 16). Importantly, the framework of the social construction has a direct relationship to the environment, and Puleo (2012) points to a diverse set of ecofeminist theories that give women the role of active subjects of ecology. Pacheco (2002) also recognizes that women play a key role in the conservation and use of biodiversity. For Pacheco (2002), conservation and the use of biodiversity is essential to defend family farming, which simultaneously protects biodiversity and cultural diversity, and also identifies that a work perspective based on sustainability and gender equality needs to create the conditions to ensure women's empowerment and recognize their role as producers of goods and managers of the environment.

In their historical praxis, women have acquired a vast knowledge of agroecological systems. They play an important role as managers of biomass flows, biodiversity conservation and plant domestication, demonstrating in many regions of the world a great knowledge of genetic and phylogenetic resources species (Pacheco, 2002, p. 153)

The author shows that the conservation and use of biodiversity is essential for the defense of family farming, which simultaneously protects biodiversity and cultural diversity, and also identifies that a work perspective based on sustainability and gender equality needs to provide the conditions to ensure women's empowerment and recognize their role as producers of goods and managers of the environment

## METHODOLOGY

The present research was conducted in the municipality of Remanso, located in the Território Sertão do São Francisco (TSSF) in the state of Bahia, Brazilian semiarid region. This territory is composed of 10 municipalities, including Remanso, Pilão Arcado, Campo Alegre de Lourdes, Juazeiro, Sento Sé, Sobradinho, Casa Nova, Curaçá, Uauá and Canudos. The combined territorial area is 61,609.7 km<sup>2</sup>, which corresponds to 10.9% of the total of the state of Bahia. This territory lies predominantly in the semiarid and arid climate zone. (BAHIA, 2018, p. 67). The research was conducted with members of the Remanso Women's Network, which is articulated with the Regional Women's Network of the Sertão do São Francisco Baiano. To carry out the study, the techniques and instruments applied were participant research and action research. The study was based on action research, for understanding the importance of the protagonism of family farmers in the process of building knowledge for real world intervention, starting from their own culture and their existing spaces of sociability. As Richardson (2003, p.7) states, action research tends to be cyclical, participatory, qualitative and reflexive, based on a different set of principles that attempt to ensure participation and change. The focus group technique was chosen as one of the most appropriate methodological strategies for the gathering of the information that is the object of this action research. As Neto (2002) points out, its organization and systematization adopt a didactic-pedagogical guideline that involves the presentation by topics of the themes discussed. The meetings mediated by the focus group were fundamental in the investigative process of the research, where the experiences and their emancipating practices, sociocultural valorization, the protagonism of women in the sustainability of the field and from production to commercialization were discussed and analyzed. In these meetings, it was sought to understand the problems of women in access to public policies and their challenges to overcome gender inequalities in the context of strengthening family farming in the municipality of Remanso, semiarid region of Bahia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Women family farmers in the Brazilian semiarid region live in their daily lives a process of oppression. Even today, women's lives are governed by the power of men, and because of this patriarchal

culture, women are left with the domestic space and men the public space. Changing this reality has not been easy; culturally, men and women incorporate and reproduce the roles that are defined by patriarchy. In developing its actions, the Remanso Women's Network has identified the need to support the productive activities of women farmer groups as a strategy to break with this culture of inferiority. One of the reasons for this is that the interests of women are not taken into account when planning productive activities. In a first moment the network leaned on the support of partner organizations, in a second moment these experiences were enhanced with the support of public programs and policies that started to be implemented in the Brazilian semiarid region. For Heilborn (2010, p. 05), "public policy can be defined as everything that the government (municipal, state, or federal) does regarding laws, regulatory measures, decisions and actions". For a long time, the Brazilian State's were unconcerned regarding family farmers, who experience, even today, a process of disputes over the investments allocated to conventional farming. As Wanderley (1996, p. 07) states, "in Brazil, the large property, dominant throughout its history, imposed itself as a socially recognized model. It was this property that received the social stimulus expressed in agricultural policy, which sought to modernize it and assure its reproduction". However, in the last decades, social mobilization and the demand for actions to support family farming in Brazil done by rural social movements led to the formulation and implementation of a set of policies, programs, and actions.

Brazilian family farming emerged as a recognized social category in the midst of a process of political dispute and political conjuncture in which the pressure of social movements began to be met, albeit partially, in their demands to the State. One of the milestones in this process of recognition of this social category was the approval of Law 11.326/2006, which establishes the guidelines and principles for the formulation of the National Policy for Family Farming and Rural Family Initiatives. This law defines the parameters for the classification of the farmer and family farmers (Brasil, 2006). The approval of this law was a major breakthrough, by recognizing family farming as an important productive segment of rural development, enabling the participation of farmers in all stages of policy formulation, implementation, and social control. The law establishes the integrated planning of several areas aiming at rural development. In this law, among its principles, the one that defines "equity in the application of policies, respecting gender, generation, and ethnicity aspects" also stands out. We realize that the process of self-organization and articulation of women was fundamental to qualify the political participation in the spaces of incidence and management of public policies, presenting proposals for the Brazilian State that considered the demands of the female public. In this process, Siliprandi (2015, p.31) highlights the processes that "thought about transformation proposals that encompassed from the world of work, the relations with nature, the spaces of social and political representation to the issues of family and affective life." (Siliprandi, 2015, p.31). Thus, the Brazilian State has an important role in the development of rural areas, especially with the implementation of public policies that contribute to the social construction of new social and economic practices in a sustainable perspective.

In recent decades rural women have been assuming their leading role as farmers. It is noticeable that the participation of rural women in the spaces of articulation of the feminist movement and the agroecological movement has enabled an approximation of the contents worked by these movements, with an understanding of the need to overcome gender inequalities on account of a patriarchal culture that has been established by society: "After many decades of mobilization and articulation of rural women around the recognition of their profession, the right to unionization, and the guarantee of their financial and productive autonomy, they begin to identify and denounce the various forms of violence also within rural families". (Siliprandi, 2009, p. 140). This author also highlights that feminism can be seen, at the same time, as a critical theory and as a social movement that is dedicated to unraveling the mechanisms of structural coercion responsible for the historical subordination of women to men. It was found that the work done by the Women's

Network was relevant to women farmers and artisanal fisherwomen, fostering their self-organization. Such actions have opened paths for the construction of new social relationships in the family, in the community, and in other spaces where they circulate, and there is recognition in the improvement of their self-esteem. The power of the patriarchal culture limits women's actions; they feel undervalued, and the work they do, both productive and reproductive, is relegated to invisibility. It can be observed that the experiences of agroecological production led by women have been enhanced by actions and projects implemented by the Advisory Service to Rural Popular Organizations (*Serviço de Assessoria a Organizações Populares Rurais*, SASOP), Regional Institute of Small Appropriate Agriculture (*Instituto Regional da Pequena Agropecuária Apropriada*, IRPAA), which had the support of partner organizations, initially from the Federal Government in different projects, and in recent years by the support of the Company for Development and Regional Action (*Companhia de Desenvolvimento e Ação Regional*, CAR), an entity linked to the government of the state of Bahia. The partnership between civil society organizations and public agencies occurred mainly through the creation of public policies at national and state levels that have supported experiences and expanded initiatives to adopt and strengthen agroecological practices and contributed to giving new meaning to the semiarid region and the lives of these women who live in this region.

**Women as Protagonists in the Sustainable Management of Agrobiodiversity in Backyards and in the Food and Nutritional Security of Families:** Among the productive activities developed by women, it can be generally observed that backyards have a great relevance in the diversified production of food, such as fruits, vegetables, medicinal and ornamental plants, grains, especially corn, beans and sesame, but also animals like poultry, pigs and rejected goats. Besides this potentiality, it is in this same space that is family's home and the cistern that stores rainwater. Traditionally this is a space that has contributed to income generation and improved food security and nutrition of families. It was found that, in the backyards of the members of the Women's Network, there are several productive initiatives such as the production of seedlings of fruit trees, production of fruits and legumes, breeding of small animals, cultivation of medicinal plants, production of vegetables and greens, among others. In addition, the presence of small animal farms in the backyards contributes decisively to the production of food (protein) and manure, which when used in crop fertilization promotes the cycling of nutrients in agroecosystems. Jalil et, al. (2019, p. 122), also recognizes backyards as one of the spaces of the agroecosystem protagonized by women, as "places of life, where they preserve and maintain agrobiodiversity, in which they grow medicinal plants for the care of the family, also a space of leisure, of productive experiences, but also of experience of the sacred, a space of peace and freedom."

Members of the Women's Network expressed that the surplus of the production of the backyard is commercialized to the community, in weekly fairs at the town, generating income for families, confirming the ability of women to make multiple profits from this subsystem. Moreover, according to Carneiro, et. al (2013, p.135) backyards, as traditional agricultural systems fulfill the "ecological function to conserve high diversity of plants in their composition, ensuring the genetic variability of many species". Oakley (2004, p. 37), also recognizes that backyards are "reservoirs of agrobiodiversity in rural communities worldwide". The narratives of the members of the Women's Network confirm the analysis described above, the backyard is a space for experimentation with agroecological practices, it is in this space that women take advantage to sow seeds, often received in interactions, in the processes of exchange of experiences between farming families, these seeds are grown in the backyard to be later cultivated in the field, usually these seeds are spread to other families. According to Oakley (2004, p. 39), "the high flow of seed exchanges within and between neighboring communities contributes to the genetic diversity of crops". It can be observed that the backyard has an integration with the other subsystems of the property, in the exchange of seeds, seedlings and organic materials, thus constituting

a strategic space for agroecological experimentation. In the development of its actions, SASOP has, over the years, contributed to enhance the potential of backyard spaces, understanding that this is an important environment for promoting food and nutritional security for families and especially for valuing women's work. Consequently, its strategy has contributed to the dissemination and share of knowledge and technologies to intensify food production in peridomestic spaces of family farms in the semiarid region, based on the agroecological approach, aiming to have a positive impact on the capacity of productive systems, better income and food security of families. The expected increase in the family income has been mainly related to non-monetary income expressed by the increase in the supply and diversity of food produced and consumed by families. Women recognize the importance of backyards in food production and their contribution to improving food and nutritional security and income generation for the family. Testimonials express important information regarding the quality of their food, and the diversification of these foods in their daily lives.

This recognition is also seen in the publication by Butto & Jalil (2019) who highlighted that the rural women and agroecological farmers are at the center of care practices and life assurance.

They are the ones who guarantee food security and sovereignty for families, given that a significant part of what they produce is intended for self-consumption, but they also play an indispensable role in income generation, demonstrating their economic contribution, they are also guardians of agrobiodiversity, since they manage animal, plant, fruit, medicinal, and ornamental species, separate and save native seeds and, finally, they are bearers of the knowledge and wisdom fundamental to the agroecological transition and the reproduction of the agroecosystem and life. (BUTTO & JALIL, 2019. p.9)

The backyard is a space of greater female dominance, the surplus production (chickens, eggs, vegetables, spices, sweets, etc.) can also be sold in the local market, creating possibilities of monetary income for women, who are usually excluded in the distribution of monetary income in the family. Butto & Jalil (2019, p. 120) call attention to the need to "break with classical economic analysis that contribute to the concealment of the complexity that involves the reproduction of life and especially work of women." To change this reality, the authors identify that it is fundamental to expand "the discussion on the fair division of domestic work and the recognition of the work done by women as part of the economy and sustainability of the agroecosystem, family and life." The experience of agroecological backyards has provided intense reproduction of seeds and seedlings adapted to local conditions providing the maintenance of varieties adapted to the environment. This is also confirmed by the analysis from Almada & Souza (2017), highlighting the multifunctional role played by backyards in their socioecological systems, given their importance in the conservation of the biodiversity and ecological processes, pointing out the need that backyards could be understood from the concept of biocultural heritage that is being built over time. Thus, the authors define "biocultural heritage as the system composed of practices, artifacts, species, knowledges and memories historically built by a particular human group regarding the ecosystems where they live" (Almada & Souza, 2017, p. 23).

In the area where the Women's Network operates, the experience of productive backyards has been disseminated. This experience strengthens agroecological transition processes, as it seeks to understand the environment, climate, and natural vocations; to value people, their wisdom, creativity, and knowledge; to use local resources: plants, water, soil, and materials; and to promote the expansion of the diversity of cultivated plants. This is a strategic action that collaborates with the strengthening of family agriculture based on agroecology. As described earlier, one of the strategies of the Women's Network was to seek to support the productive activities of women, which is an important step in the process of building women's autonomy. However, it is important to consider, as Bruno et

al. (2011, p. 80) state, that the productive group ends up bringing together distinct life trajectories that share a subordinate position in both public and private spaces. The unfolding of these activities led the women to participate in other spaces and consequently it was possible to participate in exchanges that take place in communities at the municipality and in other regions. A greater protagonism of women in productive activities, such as food processing or even handicraft production, has also helped women to leave their communities in view of the need to commercialize their products. Additionally, in their analysis, Bruno et al. (2011, p 82) recognize that productive groups have much to contribute to Brazilian society, in regard to the recognition of new political subjects and the struggle for a greater democratization of society. Miguel (2014, p 149) complements this analysis by stating that the focus on gender inequalities can lead to a reconfiguration of democracy, demanding more effectively its correspondence to the promotion of equality between individuals and conditions for the exercise of autonomy of each and every one. It is important to recognize that, even with the prolonged drought that has affected the Northeast region in recent years, the families living in this region have adopted the strategies of living with the semiarid, which mainly involves the valorization of natural resources, the diversification of agroecological production systems, and the use of social technologies aimed at storing water, fodder, food and seeds.

During the research it was possible to identify that the members of the Women's Network were able to access social security and social assistance policies, social income transfer programs, the "Luz para Todos" ("light/energy for everyone") program, technical assistance, crop insurance, unemployment insurance, and water access programs, both for consumption and for food production, among others. Hence, the work done by the Women's Network with the support of technical advice from NGOs, associated with access to public policies, contributed to the expanding of the women's in organizational, political and technical processes. For Silipandi, (2009, p. 147) "the agroecological approach values the activities traditionally developed by women (vegetable gardens, orchards, small animal farming, home processing of products)", in addition to their involvement in the various activities of the productive systems of the family unit. Even with these advances, noticed through the implementation of public policies that have contributed to strengthen and disseminate experiences of agroecological production and corroborate in the process of autonomy of women farmers, it is noted that agroecology has much to contribute to the reduction of gender inequalities in the countryside. Thus, to strengthen agroecology and its struggle for sustainability, it is necessary "to think of new relationships between men and women, based on equality, solidarity, valuing work, valuing life and the integrity of women. (Medeiros, 2010, p.24).

## CONCLUSION

The research pointed out the protagonism of the Women's Network in the process of women's organization in the countryside. Thus, it was found that, in general, the women who are part of the Network have been empowering themselves in order to strengthen the perspective of coexistence with the semiarid region. In the Network, it was possible to verify this process through the involvement of women in initiatives to stockpile food, water, and seeds both for the family and for the animals, in order to guarantee these resources during drought periods. This also shows the female insertion in the diversity of socio-productive activities, as a strategy to increase income and improve the family's food and nutritional security. It is worth highlighting the contribution of public policies to strengthen the experiences of living with the semiarid region led by women, the result of the political advocacy process of civil society organizations that contributed to the expansion of programs that support family farming, also giving evidence to the women-specific agendas. Amidst this process, we highlight the educational actions in the social, productive, and economic organization projects that had a positive impact on women's lives, such as the improvement in income generation and its consequences in promoting the autonomy and quality of life of

women and their families. Among the productive activities performed by women, it can be generally observed that backyards are essential agroecosystems for the implementation of socio-technical innovations, especially in the experimentation and implementation of agroecological practices and knowledge, but also management of agrobiodiversity and local agroecosystems. Backyards are also important environments for capturing, storing and managing the water collected through different social technologies implemented in the Brazilian semi-arid region, which also provide diversification of food production and consequently improvements in the families' nutrition. For the members of the Remanso Women's Network, backyards are strategic spaces since they promote food production, seed salvage and maintenance, including medicinal plants, supporting then a vast range of knowledges. In other words, it is in these spaces that women exercise creativity, interaction and innovation, and also contribute to the maintenance of local biodiversity. The experience of the Remanso Women's Network shows that there have been achievements in promoting equity, food security and insertion of women in spaces of political advocacy in order to highlight their agendas, visions and protagonism in the construction of sustainable development. However, efforts are still needed to implement programs and public policies with specificities and demands to gender issues, especially with the setbacks evidenced in the last 5 years caused by the cut in policies and actions that promote family farming and gender equity in the field and within the Brazilian society as a whole. To expand and strengthen the experiences of agroecological production and commercialization led by women, it is essential to continue the process of women's organization and political advocacy in order to combat the conservatism that has advanced over the lives of women, as well as to pressure the Brazilian state to implement public policies to combat poverty that promote the construction of a sustainable model of agriculture, food security and sovereignty, gender equality, and sustainable rural development.

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