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Casa da Mulher do Nordeste: Feminist Visions of Development

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CASA da MULHER do NORDESTE:
Feminist Visions of Development

by

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the unique approach of *Casa da Mulher do Nordeste* to rural women's empowerment and sustainable development. Their approach focuses on three main areas: 1) raising collective consciousness about unequal gender relations; 2) providing technical skills and assistance to in the areas of production and commercialization; 3) providing institutional support to the networks created in the occupation of economic and political spaces. CASA intimately links women's empowerment to movements of agroecology and economic solidarity, thus extending the vision of equality between women and men to equality between human beings and the Earth—an ultimate definition of sustainable development. Their founding ideology for both women's empowerment and sustainable development is feminism.

Accurate and readily available information regarding the reality of local communities suffering the effects of exclusionary capitalist globalization and their innovative strategies of resistance is crucial in our ability to better comprehend complicated intersections between local, national and global processes and how to make these relationships more sustainable. In documenting the actions and perceptions of a native NGO and rural women in Pajeú, Pernambuco, Northeastern Brazil, I hope to offer a holistic analysis of these women's strategies for resistance, with the end goals of valorizing their unique ways of producing and practicing alternative forms of knowledge, and ultimately contribute to the decentering of discourse on feminist and development theory as it is present in development practice.

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PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

This study took place in the semi-arid region of Pajeú in the interior of the state of Pernambuco in Northeastern Brazil, where the principle productive activity is subsistence agriculture. While not lacking in natural resources, the region is plagued by prolonged periods of drought. A lack of knowledge concerning the how to make use of these natural resources in the context of such drought has drastically contributed to the precarious social and economic development as well as the increasing deterioration of human and environmental conditions in the region.

The impoverishment of rural Northeastern Brazil has been further aggravated by urban-centered rapid industrialization policies which preference commercialized agrobusiness for export. Increasing inequalities between rich and poor, urban and rural populations threaten the livelihoods of those who inhabit this region and in many instances forcing migration to the cities.

Of those suffering the greatest poverty and oppression as a result of these combining factors are the women.

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream, top-down, economic approaches to development have led to the increasing concentration of resources and subsequent disenfranchisement of peoples of the global South. In the midst of extreme poverty and environmental degradation, the need for sustainable alternatives is unquestionable. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have turned this long-standing model on its head, leading a movement towards new development practices which focus on local, grassroots, community-based initiatives and target the empowerment of the world's poor.

Among the most disadvantaged of the world's poor are women, specifically rural women. Therefore, empowering and positioning this population as primary subjects of development has been a priority for many NGOs. After a brief experience with two such NGOs in Central America, I began to transformative potential, and the limits, of local sustainable development initiatives with rural women. Carefully analyzing these experiences, the positive and the negative, we come closer to discovering the most promising and effective epistemologies and methodologies for guaranteeing local empowerment and sustainable development of our society. Furthermore, in paying attention to local perceptions of complex and intersecting local, national, and global realities, we, as a global society, stand to learn from nonmodernist, industrialist, capitalist, and extractivist ways of being in the world.

For these reasons, I situate my study with *Casa da Mulher do Nordeste* (CASA), a feminist development NGO located in the northeastern state of Pernambuco, Brazil. The

first I heard of CASA was that they were training rural women to build cisterns to ensure access to drinking water in times of drought. I set out to discover what other types of projects CASA was involved in, what strategies they are using, and what innovative approaches they might have to impart to the greater development discourse, in both theory and practice.

CASA understands women's economic and political empowerment and the transformation of gender relations as indispensable for sustainable development. In strengthening women's productive organization and broadening their political representation in spaces of power, CASA challenges gender roles as defined by the traditional sexual division of labor and takes one step further in the fight against the feminization of poverty. However, empowering women is only the tip of the iceberg, one I only got a glimpse of in my three weeks with them. In addition to the women's movement, CASA belongs to the agroecology and economic solidarity movements as well.

But what do agroecology and economic solidarity have to do with women's empowerment? In this paper, I attempt demonstrate how CASA theoretically and practically links women's empowerment to broader themes of sustainability, the appropriateness and effectiveness of this strategy, and what both feminist and development theory and practice stand to learn from this experience.

METHODOLOGY

I spent three weeks in Afogados da Ingazeira moving in and out of the office of *Casa da Mulher do Nordeste* (CASA). I accompanied CASA field technicians to the communities in which they work on a daily basis. Often this meant routine visits to women's homes and their ongoing projects, checking up on fruits, vegetables, chickens and goats. Other times this meant the opportunity to participate in group exchanges in which women involved with CASA shared and benefitted from the experiences of other women, at various stages of the personal and organizational development process. This mobility allowed me to observe not only what women are doing, but how they are doing it, and how it is impacting their daily lives and identities.

I focused on interviews with CASA staff and women participants of CASA's agroecology and economic solidarity projects. Many of CASA staff interviews were carried out on bumpy car rides to communities. I tried to be present in every space: home, office, field, market, car rides, bus rides, and meals. Interviews took place in all of these environments. In an attempt to most fully integrate into the activities of my surrounding environment, I kept the vast majority of my interviews informal. This approach was more comfortable and facilitated the free speech of the women with whom I spoke. Even with permission to use a tape recorder, there was a noticeable difference in the informants' behaviour and responses.

The environment in which I completed this study was predominantly female. Rarely did I come across men. I was in fact unable to carry out interviews with the

husbands, fathers and sons of these women as I had originally planned due to the overlap of their more structured work schedule with my visits to their communities, which were dependent upon CASA's travel schedule. While I consider the dominance of female voices and opinions in this paper of extreme importance, I understand the limitations of not being able to account for male perceptions as well.

I passed the days with CASA and the nights in the town of Afogados da Ingazeira, participating in local life. This allowed me to further contextualize "rural" reality. Furthermore, in addition to my own personal reflection and discussion with CASA staff, I was able to debate and share ideas with representatives from other local non-governmental organizations and movements in the area. Had I more time, I would have liked to have spent more time with the women themselves, in their homes, their fields and other daily activities, outside their relationship with CASA.

Introduction to CASA

Casa da Mulher do Nordeste (CASA) is a feminist non-governmental organization founded in 1980 in Recife, the capital of the state of Pernambuco, born out of the disolution of the then feminist consciousness-raising group *Ação Mulher*. In a moment when most feminist organizations in Brazil were concerned with questions of women's health and sexuality, CASA became the first to search for a transformation of the female condition through a focus on economic production, envisioning women's economic autonomy as a means of liberation and empowerment ("Mulheres comemoram 25 anos de história."). Today, CASA defines its mission as "economic and political empowerment of women from a feminist perspective"¹. This explicit emphasis on a feminist perspective means recognizing women's historical exclusion from economic and political spaces and fighting for their inclusion. CASA situates its work with both urban and rural women in an effort to strengthen their productive organization and broaden their political representation in spaces of power. Equal opportunity and representation are essential for the creation of more equal gender relations and the greater sustainability of human development.

In 2000, CASA founded a second office in the municipality of Afogados da Ingazeira, the semi-arid interior of Pernambuco, in order to address the specific reality of rural women in family agriculture. Their first project was developed with a women's group in the community of Tabira. Soon however, Projeto Dom Helder Camara (PDHC)—a government initiative designed to combat rural poverty in the Northeast

¹ This quote can be found in any of CASA's official literature. Original text reads: "empoderamento econômico e político das mulheres a partir da perspectiva feminista."

through improved agrarian reform, water and food security, and agricultural production—approached CASA with a proposal of partnership. The larger context of this relationship is crucial to understanding its significance.

PDHC is a government program intended to prioritize and strengthen local development processes. As part of this mission, it works exclusively in partnership with local institutions, non-governmental organizations and social movements. A PDHC publication declares the program a success due to the fact that it strengthens civil society, uniting local actors to “discuss their needs, form opinions about possibilities and define priority actions that can significantly change their lives, their histories”² (Projeto Dom Helder Camara).

This approach to development represents a trend referred to as “community development” or “participative development” which has been adopted by government agencies and non-governmental organizations alike to incorporate the traditionally marginalized into decision-making processes affecting their lives. However, as idealistic as it sounds, this approach has often failed in its goal of social inclusion because it overlooks the complexity of internal community dynamics and differences, in particular that of gender (Guijt 1). Furthermore, “where gender issues were addressed it tended to be through specific projects or components of projects rather than as a core part of participatory planning processes” (Guijt 4). As a result, many well-intentioned development efforts have succeeded in reinforcing patriarchal social structures and further promoting unequal relations between women and men.

² Original text: “discutem suas necessidades, opinam sobre as possibilidades e definem ações prioritárias que possam alterar, significativamente, o rimo de suas vidas, suas historias”.

In an attempt to more accurately account for gender relations within communities and ensure transversality of gender issues in its program, PDHC has established strategic partnerships with local women's organizations, officially referred to as Gender Reference NGOs. CASA became PDHC's Gender Reference NGO in Pajeu, and it was decided that the first step towards addressing gender relations required a diagnostic study to identify and analyze gender roles as they are lived by women involved in family agriculture (Field Journal p 71). Seven hundred and ninety women agriculturalists, representing twenty-nine communities and nine municipalities, were interviewed. The resulting information illuminated the situation of these women, "raising various questions related to private and public spaces—the world of the house and the field, of the street and of politics"³ (Santos 8).

According to a matrix created by the women representing the sexual division of labor, women's tasks are defined as washing clothes, cleaning house, taking care of the children, cooking, collecting firewood, drawing water, and gardening (Santos 19). In contrast, men's tasks are defined as working the field, selling produce, accessing credit, participating in associations, and making decisions. Both men and women take care of the animals, clear land, plant and harvest. CASA isolates this stark division of labor as the number one obstacle limiting rural women's access to resources.

Women's traditional responsibility for daily subsistence and reproduction of the family, tasks which are unpaid and undervalued by society, have isolated her to the private sphere of the home while men's responsibility for wage labor affords them

³ Original text: "levantando várias questões relativas aos espaços privado e público – o mundo da casa e da roça, da rua e da política"

mobility outside the home, facilitating their political participation and domination of public spheres. This “domestication” of women is at the root of her historical exclusion from social, political and economic spaces, and has consequently led to the increasing feminization of poverty. Statistics from the diagnostic further support this analysis. Thirty-five percent of women interviewed identify as illiterate and 32% as not having completed primary school. In terms of social and political organization, 97% of women interviewed do not hold any type of directorship position with the organizations in which they participate. Of the 790 women interviewed, 703 do not have access to credit. Relatively half have not had access to technical training.

PDHC’s initial interpretation of these statistics meant prioritizing gender sensitivity among its technicians. However, CASA argued that these statistics demonstrated a clear need for a technical assistance program specifically designed to address women’s work and women’s needs (Field Journal p 71). Today CASA informs and monitors PDHC’s program on issues of gender, trains technicians from PDHC’s affiliate organizations, and executes projects of its own to empower women and redeem the value of her contribution to family agriculture and society.

It is the latter, engaging women within their everyday reality as actors in the transformation of their lives and that of their families which inspires CASA’s commitment to the more institutional aspects of its role as a Gender Reference NGO. For CASA staff, predominantly women of agricultural backgrounds themselves, it is this transformative personal relationship—the unique human life of each woman—that makes their work worthwhile (Field Journal p 55).

The empowerment approach

Economic and political empowerment of rural women is a complex and multifaceted goal. CASA's strategy focuses on strengthening women's productive capacity and political participation in the economy through the provision of technical assistance in areas of agroecology and artisanry. However, it must be recognized that skills for production and commercialization alone do not necessarily represent empowering types of knowledge. Nelly P. Stromquist, author of *Education as a means for empowering women*, argues that in order for new knowledge to be empowering, it must be placed "in the context of women's conditions and the need for challenging asymmetrical gendered power" (Stromquist 30). Where many government and non-governmental development initiatives fail to address this point in an effort to remain conservative, challenging asymmetrical gendered power is both inherent and explicit in CASA's driving feminist agenda.

The final presentation of the aforementioned diagnostic titled *Gender Relations in Family Agriculture declares*: "Empowerment of women is achieved through the opportunity for them to experiment with the construction of their own organizations, through redeeming their own forms of self-expression, and with that, free expression about reality, through a cumulative process of strengthening self-esteem"⁴ (Santos 17). Stromquist further develops this argument in relation to the specific situation of adult women who are developing their gender awareness: "Being a synthesis of new

⁴ Original text: "O Empoderamento das mulheres passa pela possibilidade que elas venham a ter de experimentar a construção de organizações próprias, pelo resgate da própria fala sobre si mesmas e, com isso, pela construção de uma fala livre sobre a realidade, através de um processo cumulativo de crescimento da auto-estima."

knowledge, dialogical communication and a reflection on personal experience, empowerment develops best initially at local levels, in small groups and in women-only settings” (Stromquist 26).

Emphasis on “women-only settings” has given rise to a debate among development theorist and practitioners that “gender” all too often translates to “women” in development practice. In fact, this debate has been a continued source of tension between CASA and other local organizations and social movements in the region. Stromquist maintains, however, that in order for empowerment interventions to succeed in challenging patriarchal ideologies, “women must set aside a separate time and space for themselves to question collectively their situation and develop their critical thinking about it, prioritize issues to tackle and acquire skills that enhance women’s individual and collective autonomy” (Stromquist 26).

This is the defining feminist logic determining each step of CASA’s strategy. CASA’s approach to empowerment can be divided into three areas: 1) organizing groups of women in order to raise collective consciousness about unequal gender relations; 2) providing technical skills and assistance in the areas of production and commercialization; 3) providing institutional support to the networks created in the occupation of economic and political spaces.

Formulating gender consciousness

The process of empowerment begins with a series of what CASA calls “gender workshops” or “gender training”. These workshops stimulate discussion on themes such

as the sexual division of labor, domestic violence, women's rights, self-esteem and leadership formation. Special attention is placed on deconstructing gender dynamics within the family because, as CASA staff member Branca points out, the cultural tendency to view the family as perfect is a number one contributor to women's subordination (Field Journal p 54). Therefore, she says, they have to spend time making sure the women understand what is and is not acceptable within the family. One of the tactics used to facilitate this discussion encourages women to share personal experiences and talk about life at home, uncovers that what is experienced by one is often experienced by many (Field Journal p 56). This collective realization allows these women to begin to identify the behavior as wrong, and in doing so look to each other for support in discovering solutions.

CASA's feminist politics are present in these gender workshops, but approaching the issue can be complicated. Branca comments that in the beginning, many of these women reject the word "feminist", preferring "feminine" because it's "prettier" (Field Journal p 46). While acknowledging her own personal qualms with certain cultural implications of the word "feminine", she says that as an organization CASA tries to prove that a woman doesn't have to give up being feminine to be feminist (Field Journal 46). Lúcia, one of CASA's agroecology technicians, adds, "once we explain what being a feminist really is, the women say 'Oh! Well then I am. I was and I didn't know it! In that case I am feminist'" (Field Journal p 36).

The participatory nature of these workshops positions women as subjects, independent worth, rights and needs: "it enables women to see themselves as individuals

with agency beyond their responsibilities for home and family” (Stromquist 28). Nevertheless, raising gender consciousness among women is only the first step. A woman named Viusa argues from her own personal experience that getting women to recognize or even denounce gender discrimination was not enough (Field Journal 57). She came home with all these new ideas in her head, but her husband was still not ready to accept change because, according to her, he had not gone through the same process and did not understand.

Recognizing the need to incorporate men in to the transformation of gender relations, CASA organized a follow-up workshop specifically for men. The men were asked to watch a short video titled *Acorda Raimundo*, or *Wake Up Raymond*, in which gender roles have been inverted. Viusa laughs remembering—the men’s reaction was quite unexpected! They were quick to exclaim that under no circumstances would they want anyone to treat them that way, to which the women responded—if you refuse to accept that type of treatment for yourselves, then how can you justify doing the same to your wives? Since then, Viusa says approvingly, some of them have tried to make changes. Among those setting the precedent are Viusa’s sons, who she says she has tried to teach respect and the importance of sharing household chores. Lúcia reflects on the overall process: “Machismo here is huge, so this is a real achievement for the women. We go in and pose these questions about gender, and they begin to realize that they really do have equal rights” (Field Journal p 40).

However, gender awareness alone does not eradicate poverty. Lúcia comments that workshops which preach women’s empowerment and gender equality are eventually

lost on women whose lives demand concrete results: “They tell us, ‘I want to see it in practice, a project with financial return. We want income, we want to be able to live’” (Field Journal p 37). It is for this reason, she continues, that CASA weaves pieces of the gender discourse into the more tangible process of providing technical assistance and improving these women’s access to resources in their rural environment.

Technical assistance and the implications of economic empowerment

Indeed, evidence suggests that the most successful efforts to empower poor women in Latin America are those which “offer both a material and a subjective dimension” (Stromquist 33). This is because many women are financially dependent on men. Therefore, material conditions which promote her financial independence ultimately contribute to her empowerment. Within the context of family agriculture, women’s productive activities are viewed as an extension of the home or auxiliary to the husband’s primary, and therefore go unpaid, despite the fact that many of these women complete the same tasks as their husbands in addition to their responsibilities in the home. This logic rationalizes the exploitation of women’s labor and the subsequent subordination of her person. CASA further cites women’s financial dependence on men as a determining factor in her silence in situation of sexual and domestic violence (Santos 35).

In providing technical assistance to women in the areas of production and commercialization, CASA aims to reduce the invisibility of women’s productive labor and financially recognize her unpaid contribution to the family economy. Principally

organized around tasks women already carry out in their daily lives, CASA offers technical training in agroecology and artisanry.

Agroecology. CASA provides women with the tools and expertise to establish their own productive garden and/or group of small animals, most commonly chickens, goats and pigs. This initial step gives women something to call her own and a future source of income. CASA often provides the seeds and building materials for the gardens and a few animals with which to start the breeding process. The word “expertise” is a relative term. CASA works step-by-step alongside the women in developing a set of alternative practices, known as agroecology, which are capable of maximizing productivity without sacrificing the environment.

In the semi-arid region of Pajeu, where prolonged periods of drought can range anywhere from six months to five years, discovering these alternatives is just as much about preserving human life as it is about nature. Lúcia comments: “When its raining, everything is wonderful. But when the drought hits...”—she stops, shaking her head—“our work in agriculture is limited because of this. There are people who are courageous, who like to work, but who don’t have water” (Field Journal p 39). In this context, providing women with knowledge and skills which facilitate her ability to supply food, water and energy to her family even in times of scarcity, alleviates the weight of her responsibility, therefore allowing for her greater mobility.

Alternatives methods have included various types of cisterns, solar powered irrigation systems, natural pesticides, compost-based fertilizers, and biodiversity of crops among others. Special attention is paid to selecting species of plants and animals that are

most resistant to the harsh physical environment. For example, smaller tomatoes are naturally less likely to rot than larger ones (Field Journal p 22). Another example involves raising a breed of chicken which actually eats less while yielding the same amount of meat. In addition to more formal technical courses, CASA emphasizes the production of knowledge through sharing experiences among women and among technicians. This exchange of information facilitates each woman's discovery of the most appropriate techniques for the specific layout and soil of her specific terrain. These agroecological alternatives significantly improve agricultural production, enabling these women to ensure the alimentation of their families, and the opportunity to market the "fruits" of their labor as a source of income. Terezinha brings home R\$25 after only one day at the local agroecology fair, putting her individual monthly income to roughly \$100 (Field Journal p 48), double that of most women working in agriculture in Pajeu (Santos 47).

However, a combination of geographic isolation and well-rooted machismo can make getting to this point a slow process. Several cases exist in which husbands try to discourage their wives from putting her effort into anything other than her household chores (Field Journal p 23). Her mobility threatens his monopoly over decision-making. CASA field technicians use their weekly visits to resolve technical matters as they arise, but also as an avenue to make sure women are claiming their rights. Unfortunately, the rainy season turns dirt roads into a quagmire or even rivers, making access and "technical" assistance difficult.

Artesanry. CASA has also helped organized groups of women, such as *Grupo Xique-Xique* in Monte Alegre, access the resources necessary to run a small cooperative

business. Through an affirmative-action micro-credit program specifically designed for women, *Grupo Xique-Xique* now has access to their very own facility for confection of traditional fruit and milk-based sweets. The women have also received training in improved methods, management and commercialization. True to their roots, they use only agroecological products, selected from their own gardens or if necessary of their neighbors. While their facility is equipt with a wood stove, Viusa specifies that cutting down trees would be against their founding agroecological principles and therefore, they are careful to collect only dead wood (Field Journal p 60). The finished product is marketed at the local agroecology fair as well as in the recently inaugurated store run by the women's economic solidarity network *Rede de Mulheres Produtoras de Pajeu*⁵, of which *Grupo Xique-Xique* is a part. Other participating women's groups devote their energies to traditional handcrafts, such as crochet and bordering—the primary merchandise of the same store. Together, these women supply, manage and staff their own store.

Challenging gendered power. Organizing women and providing them skills which allow them mobility outside the domestic sphere breaks down the private/public dichotomy which still exists between many women and men in rural areas. However, some would argue that offering “small abilities” such as chicken-raising or crochet actually reinforces traditional female roles and does little to challenge asymmetrical gendered power. On the contrary, the counter-argument asserts that in claiming this identity, Latin American women are “redefining and transforming their domestic role

⁵ This network represents forty women from tem municipalities.

from one of private nurturance to one of collective, public protest, in this way challenging traditional seclusion of women in the private sphere of the family” (Safa 228). In empowering autonomous women’s collectives, CASA creates space where women make their work visible, “demanding to be recognized as full participants in the public world” (Safa 228).

CASA challenges the traditional roles of women and men in other ways as well. During PDHC’s One Million Cisterns Program (PIMC), CASA launched a criticism that the program’s methodology was reinforcing the traditional sexual division of labor (Agricultoras 9). Marli, the local coordinator of CASA, observes that training courses in the construction of cisterns were attended almost exclusively by men, while women were more present in courses focused on maintenance—re-establishing men’s productive role as creator and women’s reproductive role as care-giver (Almeida 9). Convinced that must transform gender relations in order for it to be sustainable, CASA joined forces with Diaconia and offered the first cistern construction course exclusively for women. Simultaneously, CASA emphasized the importance of male participation in activities concerning water maintenance in the home.

Breaking such a paradigm was not easy. In an interview following the completion of the course, one of the participants describes the process as a great challenge:

“No one believed that we were capable. The men said that the heavy labor wasn’t for us. Even heavier is carrying twenty liters of water on your head, three to four kilometers, everyday. In addition to being mother and wife, we are also capable of

being good professionals. Now, everyone believes and are in awe, principally my father who doubted the whole time”⁶ (Almeida 9).

Fathers were not the only ones who needed convincing. Despite successful completion of the course, PDHC partner organizations still demonstrated certain resistant to contract women builders (Field Journal p 55). After much political struggle, CASA ensured contracts for these women builders, who now earn R\$95 per cistern (Almeida 10).

Whether improving women’s ability to carry out traditionally female tasks or providing skills which challenge the sexual division of labor, CASA is breaking down barriers surrounding women’s lives. Through their participation in professional training courses, women are claiming ownership of their labor and positioning themselves as independent economic and political subjects, whose needs must be met by development programs. Her presence in spaces of public commerce, force the recognition of her labor and increase her economic autonomy—two more steps towards gender equality.

Occupying economic and political space

Rural women’s presence and participation in economic and political spaces of power is perhaps CASA’s most ideal yet most difficult goal. CASA provides social and political support to the women’s networks created, such as *Grupo Xique-Xique* and *Rede de Mulheres Produtoras de Pajeú*, in their occupation and appropriation of these spaces.

⁶ Original text: “Ninguém acreditava que a gente era capaz. Os homens diziam que era serviço muito pesado para nós. Muito mais pesado é carregar uma lata de 20 litros, cheia de água, na cabeça, numa distancia de três a quatro quilômetros, todos os dias. Nós, além de mãe, esposa e dona-de-casa, também temos capacidade de ser boas profissionais. Agora, todos acreditam e se admiram, principalmente meu pai que duvidou o tempo todo.” Maria Aparecida

This concept of appropriation is key. Branca, whose job brings her closest to the *Rede de Mulheres Produtoras de Pajeú*, defines political empowerment as women who are organized, who know their rights, and who demand them (Field Journal p 46). “Occupying space is our right and not to want to occupy the space of others,” she says. Competition—characteristic of the exploitative capitalist market—is not part of the feminist proposal. Feminism proposes a new economy, one of solidarity. Through their participation in the collective economic solidarity network *Rede de Mulheres Produtoras de Pajeú*, CASA and the women they work with are pioneering this movement.

This local network participates in a larger regional network, *Rede de Mulheres Produtoras do Nordeste*, which connects hundreds of women throughout the Northeast in the states of Pernambuco, Paraíba, Bahia, Ceará, Maranhão and Piauí. Founded in 1996, this regional network created overlapping spaces in which women could exchange experiences in search of collective alternatives to the difficulties they suffered as women trying to make it alone in the business world. This network maintains an “important articulation for the construction of political and economic autonomy of the women producers of the Northeast”⁷ (Casa da Mulher do Nordeste). Three times a year this articulation appears in the network’s newsletter *Mãos Femininas Desconstruindo a cultura*, or *Feminine Hands Deconstructing culture*. Articles feature the activities of local women’s groups and larger economic issues impacting women’s lives. The article “Why feminists say no to ‘free trade’” argues:

⁷ Original text: “uma importante articulação para a construção da autonomia econômica e política das mulheres produtoras do Nordeste.”

“Within neoliberal globalization, in its new and old forms of imperialism, we live subjected to a perverse combination of market and patriarchy [...] Within this order our work is exploited, it is the cheap commodity produced by the sexual division of labor, that which makes us responsible for the ‘domestic’ work of invisible management of misery and precarity [...] The international division of labor that drives capitalist globalization cannot survive without the silence of women from the global South, without the machismo that oppresses and threatens them until they accept the conditions of ‘the market’ as the only solution”⁸ (Giovanni 3).

The author insists that the first step in the “battle against the tyranny of the market” is for women to reject the idea that the economy is something “separate from our everyday experience of the production of life” (Giovanni 1).

Another such article “Women say no to the transposition of the San Francisco River” accuses the project of channeling water resources to agrobusiness, and in that contributing to women’s poverty, “who due to cultural attributes are responsible for the reproductive labor which, among other activities, includes the management of water within the family”⁹ (“Mulheres dizem não à transposição do São Francisco”). Another short piece calls for the collective denouncement of multi-national corporation Coca Cola’s blatant degradation of the environment.

⁸ Original text: “Na globalização neoliberal, nas novas e velhas formas de imperialismo, vivemos sob uma combinação perversa entre mercado e patriarcado [...] Nessa ordem nosso trabalho é explorado, é a mercadoria barata produzida pela divisão sexual do trabalho, que nos responsabiliza pelo trabalho ‘domestico’ de gestão invisível da miséria e da precariedade [...] A divisão internacional do trabalho que move a globalização capitalista não vive sem o silêncio das mulheres do Sul global, sem o machismo que as oprime e ameaça até que aceitem as condições ‘do mercado’ como única solução.”

⁹ Original text: “as quais por atribuições culturais são responsáveis pelo trabalho reprodutivo que, entre outras atividades, inclui a gestão da água no ambiente familiar.”

This newsletter attempts to localize the effects of national and international politics within the context of rural women's lives. This linking global and national forces to the consequences suffered in everyday lives of women and their communities is necessary if empowerment is to transcend the limitations of remaining isolated in local politics (Parpart 3-4). Unfortunately, low rural literacy rates limit access to this information. In an effort to ensure rural women's access to information surrounding these issues, CASA organizes periodic thematic seminars addressing the effects of these politics on women's everyday lives.

To a large extent CASA emphasizes the occupation, or in some instances creation, of alternative or informal economic and political spaces. The Agroecology Fair and the *Rede de Mulheres Produtoras de Pajeú* are two local examples. But CASA plays an important role in linking local women to state, regional and national conferences concerning family agriculture and economic solidarity. Terezinha traveled by plane to Belém in the state of Para to present her experience with CASA at a regional conference on family agriculture. The level of empowerment in this example is what CASA's mission is all about—improving women's access to economic and political resources within her rural environment.

However, progression to this point is a “process,” as CASA staff fondly refers to it. The most immediate changes are found within the contexts of the home and the local agricultural community. I observed one such example at the Agroecology Fair when a representative from *Grupo Xique-Xique* declared to Branca that there was a banana truck blocking the visibility of her and other Agroecology stands, and that she wanted to talk to

the *prefeitura*, or local governing office, about making him re-locate. This woman is not only fulfilling her right to actively participate in this space, but defending her right to occupy that space and not be made invisible by the presence of others.

Rural resistance and sustainable development

Despite the widespread adoption of empowerment rhetoric by mainstream development institutions such as the World Bank, CASA's approach remains grounded in the reality of the women it seeks to empower. CASA's ability to respond to the specific needs of rural women while pioneering sustainable development alternatives can inform a decentering of both feminist theory and development practice.

Carolyn Sach's, author of Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture and Environment, asserts that "rural social theories inadequately conceptualize gender relations. Urban-based feminist theory and practice also inadequately address the context of rural women's lives" (Sachs 3). She points out that "although rural women have not been at the forefront of feminist movements, they take steps to significantly shape their lives" (Sachs 9). Vandana Desai completes this thought in her discussion of women's informal politics in the slums of Bombay: "Thus, if women choose to support subtle, informal strategies rather than judge their efforts as conservative or 'politically immature', we should perhaps consider why they support them and to what extent they effectively challenge oppressive relations" (Desai 220).

Rural women working in familiar agriculture have a fundamental role in the production of food for the family, therefore it should not be difficult to understand why

the generation of income through production and commercialization of agricultural goods and handcrafts is considered by rural women workers themselves the primary and most effective strategy for organizing and raising consciousness. CASA recognizes the value of acting on these practical gender interests. Strengthening women's productive organization enhances her ability to fulfill her role of providing for her family, thus contributing to the eradication of poverty in the countryside. CASA strategically takes advantage of this opportunity to rupture the isolation surrounding women's lives, raising both their collective gender consciousness and economic and political participation. While maintaining a feminist ideology, this approach does not complicate its mission with universal visions of women's empowerment, but focuses on empowering women within the context of their daily lives and environment.

Furthermore, CASA succeeds in integrating broader issues with women's concerns. Participation in movements such as agroecology and economic solidarity is crucial to these women's ability to arouse the support and collaboration of their male companions. As stated by the female cistern builder above, her father was skeptical of her activities until he saw the positive impact she brought to their community. Lúcia also observes that men tend to be more open to accepting women as equals when they see what she is able to accomplish for the well-being of their families (Field Journal p 51).

"First World" feminist theory might argue that this persistent view of women as servants to the family is evidence of continued machismo. However, this argument ignores the possibility of unique feminisms developed by women in the "Third World" which address her specific reality. Viusa, a very well-spoken woman and someone who I

came to understand as a leader, says she does not care much for strict definitions of feminism, it is whatever is good for her family (Field Journal p 57). Her comment elucidates the basics of decentering feminism, which requires a rejection of “essentialist and universalizing constructions of women in favor of accounts that produce a richer and deeper understanding of how women construct their identities within material and discursive boundaries that are both particular and contingent” (Barker 178-9). In prioritizing to rural women’s perceptions and strategies for improving their own lives, CASA expands the potential of feminism and development to transform women’s lives.

Strategies which respond to the needs of marginalized family agriculturalists such as agroecology and economic solidarity, propose “nonmodernist ways of being in the world [...] a way of being without a radical division between the human and non-human world, between human welfare and the welfare of the environment” (Barker 182). The agroecology movement rejects agricultural practices which exploit the environment in search of maximum profit, such as the use of agrottoxins and intense monoculture. In providing technical training to women in agroecological methods and campaigning against agrottoxins, against monoculture, against patenting of seeds on a daily basis, CASA defends the viability of family agriculture not only as a means of production, but as a way of life. Convincing small farmers on a grassroots level to deconstruct the “development equals modernization paradigm that naturalizes the institutions and processes of industrialization and justifies environmental degradation” is an important step in the movement towards more sustainable development (Barker 178).

To a large extent, economic solidarity networks make this resistance possible. The economic solidarity model poses the human being as the subject and finality of economic activity and not the private accumulation of wealth. Elaine, one of the members of the *Rede de Mulheres Produtoras de Pajeú*, accurately describes economic solidarity as a social movement (Field Journal p 44). Indeed, economic solidarity is a movement founded *in solidarity* with people's movements, for workers rights, for agrarian reform, for the self-determination of traditional communities and the recognition of their unique knowledge and practices, for urban reform, housing and recycling, for an end to discrimination against women and for the recognition of her fundamental role in a solidary economy, and for sustainable development and preservation of our natural resources. Moreover, economic solidarity rejects homogenizing forces of neoliberal globalization, and together with agroecology provides a viable alternative for development, one which envisions sustainability in practically all its definitions.

Conclusions

CASA's ability to provide women, and their communities, with access to new kinds of resources, and thereby new potential and possibilities, stands as an example of transformative empowerment and development practice. In responding directly to the local reality which shapes the lives of rural women in Pajeú, CASA deconstructs dichotomies of power: between men and women, between NGO staff and participants, between global North and global South. Empowering women as equal subjects in economic and political spheres, and ultimately development discourse, CASA contributes to the

decentering of knowledge and resources. The access of women from the global South to resources of knowledge and power is critical in the creation of a sustainable society based in equality.

Their model which places women as protagonists of their own development and that of their communities directly undermines the asymmetrical power relationships established by a world order which insists values of modern, industrial, capitalist, and even Western “democratic” dominance. In encouraging rural women’s unique forms of expression, organization and political articulation, CASA opens the door to a deeper, more authentic dialogue on issues of feminism, democracy and sustainable development.

As a grass-roots feminist sustainable development organization, CASA forms part of a which “mounts a critique of the entire development process and the hegemony of Western scientific discourse, and offers a perspective that emphasizes the interrelationships between people, their communities, and their life support systems” (Barker 180). This movement calls for a renewal of grassroots politics, and of people’s voices. Only through this renewed dialogue can we strive towards local empowerment, equality and sustainable development. For CASA, the process begins in the home, in the field, in local reality and in the ability to progressively reclaim autonomous ways of living.

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APPENDIX

1. My proposal was to study empowerment and sustainable development approaches which target women in developing countries of the global South. The goal was to document alternative forms of knowledge and being in the world other than that offered by modern industrialist countries of the global North, such as the United States. Therefore, this project could be carried out in many countries other than Brazil, but not the U.S.
2. I could have studied the agroecology movement as it exists in the U.S., and more specifically women's involvement. While I know very little about family agriculture in the U.S., I imagine that the infrastructure of a First World country would reduce the empowering nature of survival strategies such as agroecology or economic solidarity.
3. The ISP is not my first encounter with experiential learning. However, in comparison to other experiences it was the most formal and academically demanding. I often felt uncomfortable in my role as student researcher, but that may have just been growing pains. In previous experiential learning experiences, I have been student volunteer or intern, never researcher. I enjoy the process of investigation into local reality, but through a process of integration and participation, not structured interviews and a constant taking of notes.
4. My goal in completing this research was to expand the discourses of feminist and development theory and practice. Therefore, my monograph constantly refers to

other authors writing in this field. However, my use of theory from secondary sources is to contextualize CASA's approach to women's empowerment and sustainable development. Any reference to theory is immediately related back to my interviews and observations with CASA.

5. Beginning with my proposal, I went in search to document and analyze CASA's approach and specific methodology for empowering women through sustainable development alternatives. Thus, I filtered information based on whether or not it directly related to the causes and effects of CASA's strategy.
6. I am actually very awkward and uncomfortable in the D.I.E. method proposed by FSS. Its scientific break down of events interferes with my actual ability to reflect upon the incident and its implications. I have a much more personal style, which I felt was discouraged by FSS. The community project exercise on the other hand was an extremely helpful practice run. However, every local reality is unique and I could not prepare for what methods would be most appropriate until I was actually in the process.
7. Honestly, I did not find the FSS model very helpful, and would prefer more opportunity for critique of our ability to execute the methods we are learning.
8. First, lack of guidance. I felt completely on my own to navigate this research and complicated local relationships. My advisor was wonderful, but my ability to share my work with her for her critique was limited. I would have preferred more criticism, constructive of course. I looked for guidance and criticism from my local host, Risolene, and from Silviana, but feel that a more consistent advisor

would have been helpful. Second, my dependency on CASA for access to the women's communities frustrated my ability to spend more time with the women outside their relationship with CASA. For this reason, I was not able to carry out interviews with husbands, fathers, and sons as planned, for they were away at work during CASA's visiting hours.

9. My ability to access women's communities was contingent upon CASA's visiting hours. Therefore I got an extensive view of CASA's role as intervening NGO, but a more limited view of the lives of the women who participate. I could have asked to spend the night with some of these women, but ultimately decided that my imposition on their hospitality was not appropriate and therefore relied on CASA in periodic transportation to these communities. As a result, my observations focus more on women's experiences as lived in the public sphere, and not in the home.
10. My original topic did not change, however I did encounter the need to specify the type of organization I was interested in and what I meant by sustainable development. I had also originally thought I would situate my study with an actual community of women versus a regional NGO, but was not opposed to this change and do not feel it compromised my ability to accomplish my goals.
11. My advisor was very helpful as far as linking me with resources, and it was in fact upon her recommendation that I approached CASA. Interviewees were often identified by CASA as strong women willing to share their personal experiences, but I informally talked with as many women as I could. CASA provided a good

deal of publications related to their work, including publications by them. Preliminary research was done independently in the University of Richmond library.

12. I relied on observation and interviews. My ability to “participate” was limited. However, I made a point to accompany CASA activities whenever and wherever possible. While I was unable to do anything productive for CASA or local women, I tried to integrate as much as I could to their joint activities.
13. My relationship with my advisor was occasionally helpful in reflecting on the local gender discourse and institutional politics. Coming from the rural workers’ union, her rhetoric was focused more on class than gender which was important for me to note. I think that in a way her amazing positivity and humility kept her from critiquing my interpretation of findings. I would have enjoyed a more active relationship with her, had circumstances permitted.
14. Dead ends. Not exactly, although at times I was hoping for more profound or analytical responses than I ended up receiving. I wish I had had more access to CASA’s coordinator, as her perspective is unique. I had only one experience which I initially deemed unapplicable. I chose to accompany a Projeto Dom Helder Camara team to a community in an attempt to gain insight into how participative and gender-sensitive their approach really is. I was disillusioned by the experience. A giant team of representatives from various local organizations came and preached to the local community. The community members nodded their heads. Later, this experience helped me take a more critical stance on

PDHC. However, it is impossible for me to make judgements on PDHC based on one visit alone.

15. I learned to appreciate the idiosyncrasies of rural life—its serenity, its isolation. However, my experience was ultimately influenced by my presence during the rainy season. Had I visited during the drought, I imagine my perceptions of rural life would be much different. Nevertheless, this opportunity to interact with rural women who depend on family agriculture for a living gave me a new appreciation for their daily struggle, values and support systems. My experience has also solidified my support for organically grown produce and my opposition of exploitative mass agriculture.
16. In addition to improving my Portuguese, the ISP period allowed me to complement my understanding of urban Brazil with that of rural Brazil. In addition to learning Brazilian culture, I was interested in learning NGO culture.
17. 1) Appreciating a diversity of feminisms. 2) The job of NGOs is not to emancipate anyone from anything, but to improve their access to resources, whether it be self-expression, income or public spaces. Ultimately it is this access resources, their ability to participate in determining their fate and that of the world, which is empowering. 3) Working with NGOs is about working with people, it is an ever complicated process, but as Branca reminds me, we need to learn to love the process.
18. Try to penetrate the lives of the participants and discover the meaning of thie work to their lives. Representing the perceptions of the NGO is nothing without

the perceptions of those who benefit from its work. Find someone to criticize your work! Development is a messy business, and it is exactly overlooking complexity that gets us into underdevelopment in the first place.

19. Yes. In fact, I am even more driven to undertake a similar project with other organizations in other countries. I would like to develop a more extensive project which combines work for an NGO with my analysis of their process. It takes true proximity, an insider's view, to truly discover the potentialities and limits of NGOs and their approaches.