

## **Gender equality and women's rights in the CLOC-Via Campesina movement**

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The CLOC<sup>2</sup> is the Latin American continent's space for coordination as part of the international social movement Via Campesina,<sup>3</sup> founded in 1993. Via Campesina interconnects the social struggles of community-based organisations in four continents, grouping 150 organisations from 70 countries.<sup>4</sup> As a movement, it is made up of organisations of peasants, small and medium sized agricultural producers, indigenous people, the landless, young people, migrants, afro-descendants and agricultural workers. Via Campesina was born out of the need to develop a common vision for rural peoples facing the negative consequences of globalisation in governmental agricultural policies and agro-industry. It came about in a historical context between 1989 and 1992 when Latin American organisations linked up through the continent-wide campaign "500 years of indigenous, black and popular resistance".

The CLOC is representative, legitimate, independent and plural. It was constituted in 1994 to bring together and strengthen the identity and particular demands of rural peoples from Latin America, involving 84 organisations from 18 countries.<sup>5</sup> Of these approximately nine are rural women's organisations and the vast majority are

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<sup>1</sup> This study was carried out using as a source the perceptions of ten women leaders of national member organisations of the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo -CLOC Vía Campesina) in seven countries (Honduras, Peru, Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador). The following people were interviewed: Loyda Olivo (Ecuador), Adriana Meza (Brazil), Esperanza Cardona (Honduras), Cinthya Gonzalez (Paraguay), Mirta Coronel (Argentina), Lourdes Huanca (Peru), Francisca Rodriguez Alicia Muñoz and Florencia Aróstica (Chile). In addition interviews were held with three male leaders from a mixed Chilean Rural Confederation (Confederación Campesina) and with Nalú Fariás of the World March of Women (Marcha Mundial de Mujeres - MMM).

This is an extended version of a case study of the same title showcased in the *In Brief* bulletin included in BRIDGE's *Cutting Edge* Pack on Gender and Social Movements.

<sup>2</sup> Latin American Coordination of Rural Organisations (Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo -CLOC Vía Campesina)

<sup>3</sup> Literally in English: the peasants' way or road

<sup>4</sup> <http://viacampesina.org/en/>

<sup>5</sup> [www.cloc-viacampesina.net](http://www.cloc-viacampesina.net)

mixed-gender. The CLOC is against neo-liberalism and its key focuses are food sovereignty and integrated agrarian reform.<sup>6</sup> Its organisations explicitly defend access to land, territories, water and seeds, as well as women's rights and gender equality.

### **The CLOC and gender equality**

In 1997, CLOC's first Women's Assembly was held as an initiative of women leaders, in order to place on the table the particular problems and demands of peasant women. At this meeting an agreement on gender parity was signed, which meant that 50% of those in decision-making spaces must be women. In 2001, at the second Women's Assembly, held before the 3rd CLOC Congress, the Continental Women's Network<sup>7</sup> was established as an organic part of the CLOC structure. This network groups together all of the women from the different member organisations. Its aims are to defend rural women's rights and to promote the inclusion of a gender focus in all of the movement's documents, proposals and actions. It acts as a team made up of women leaders, two from each sub-region (the Andean region, Southern Cone, North American the Caribbean and Central America). Two women from this group represent the network in the Political Commission of the CLOC-VC.

In the mid 2000s in Latin America, an alliance was made with the World March of Women (Marcha Mundial de Mujeres - MMM) as a result of the search for affinity, consensus and block positions in the international committee of the assembly of social movements for the World Social Forum, and in the campaigns against ALCA<sup>8</sup> (Free Trade Area of the Americas-FTTA) and the World Trade Organisation. In 2007 this worldwide alliance was strengthened when Via Campesina and World March of Women jointly organised the first Forum for Food Sovereignty "Nyeleni", in Mali.

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<sup>6</sup> This is a political process that seeks to modify the stratification of land ownership and avoid its concentration in the hands of large landowners. CLOC proposes a social and popular-based integrated land reform without exclusions due to gender or race. It is not only a process that expropriates land from large estate owners to return it to peasants (men and women), but it also defends the social function of the earth for food production and common use. This benefits women, poor people from the cities and men and women consumers. For more see an interview with Francisca Rodríguez: <http://www.youtube.com/user/BRIDGEsocialmovement> or <http://vimeo.com/bridgesocialmovements/videos>

<sup>7</sup> Articulación Continental de Mujeres

<sup>8</sup> Acuerdo de Libre Comercio de Las Américas

In CLOC-VC's fourth Women's Assembly in 2010, held prior to the fifth CLOC Congress, the women delegates took on board the concept of feminism, using the slogan "*without feminism there is no socialism*", as a gateway into the egalitarian socialist project they aspire to build. But even with continuous and frequent debate, the slogan is accepted with mistrust and fear by the different strata of the wider organisation.

The changes experienced by women in the rural world are undeniable. Their greater economic autonomy results in greater participation in social organisations and within the rural popular movement. Whereas "*before, women just made and served the coffee*",<sup>9</sup> they are now a central force in today's mixed movements; their work is legitimised and they are key in political decision-making. Women have risen up and the majority of the organisations now have women on their boards of directors. Gender equality is incorporated in the international agenda of the CLOC-VC movement and its women leaders are seen as perseverant, daring and creative peers, with their own creative thinking and proposals in times of crises.

### **Successes**

One strategy used by women to acquire visibility and to be considered as equals by male leaders, communities and institutional authorities, has been to form autonomous women's organisations and spaces within the mixed organisations that are members of the CLOC-VC. This work in building and strengthening women's opinions has enabled them to gain greater voice within the movement. They are also supported by mutual solidarity and stronger ties between women leaders, young leaders and other social groups who all have something in common; they are not part of traditional power structures in the movement.

Another strategy used by the Women's Network within the CLOC-VC has been to organise training schools for women, inviting women from outside and from member organisations to address the strategy of linking gender equality with class equality. Through this process, women also recognise each other as subjects of rights, make themselves visible, empower themselves and do away with their fears and mistrust. In mixed groups the emblematic women leaders act as role models for other women's empowerment processes, and they train others in how to confront discrimination or abuse and to do public speaking. In this sense, the

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Francisca Rodriguez, National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas) ANAMURI, Chile.  
<http://www.youtube.com/user/BRIDGEsocialmovement> or  
<http://vimeo.com/bridgesocialmovements/videos>

movement is an ongoing training school, and the “teachers” are part of the same school.<sup>10</sup>

At present the women of CLOC-VC are working together to build the contents of their proposal for rural popular feminism. This proposal transgresses the status quo of their communities, since it questions traditional sexual mandates and is unpopular with people who defend masculine and patriarchal ideas and practices.

In this process, engagement with local feminist agendas and struggles for gender equality has been strategic. Actions have been carried out on International Women’s Day and the International Day for Non-Violence against Women, using creative media such as theatre and cinema with political content to address issues ranging from sexual harassment to land tenure. These actions have been organised on local levels in rural communities and open spaces in the cities, involving other social groups too.

The main gains over the last 15 years are: the visibility of the Women’s Network; gender parity established in 1997; the increase in women members;<sup>11</sup> a clear position against sexual harassment within the movement; and the campaigns promoted initially by women, “From Seeds”, “Food Sovereignty” and “Enough Violence”, later taken up by the whole organisation.<sup>12</sup> Access to the internet has been an area of opportunity for staying connected and informed, and has even helped some women to participate, link up and grow stronger.

## **Tasks and challenges ahead**

Beyond these considerable gains, women face difficulties, the most visible of which are in the mixed organisations. Masculine organisational models persist and these limit advances made in achieving gender parity, and reproduce discriminatory

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Lourdes Huanca, Federation of Peruvian Rural, Indigenous and Black Women (Federación de Mujeres Campesinas, Indígenas and Negras del Perú).

<http://www.youtube.com/user/BRIDGEsocialmovement> or

<http://vimeo.com/bridgesocialmovements/videos>

<sup>11</sup> There are no systematised sex-segregated statistics on CLOC members and changes in these over time. Affiliated organisations are very dynamic in their composition, some of whom have not thousands, but millions of associates. What can be established is the rise in women’s presence in community organisations that are members and in women delegates to CLOC Congresses (interview with Francisca Rodríguez, Chile).

<sup>12</sup> More information about these campaigns can be found at:

[http://www.biodiversidadla.org/Principal/Otros\\_Recursos/Campana\\_Semillas\\_de\\_Identidad\\_-\\_Por\\_la\\_defensa\\_de\\_la\\_Biodiversidad\\_y\\_la\\_Soberania\\_Alimentaria;](http://www.biodiversidadla.org/Principal/Otros_Recursos/Campana_Semillas_de_Identidad_-_Por_la_defensa_de_la_Biodiversidad_y_la_Soberania_Alimentaria;)

<http://conamuri.org.py/alimentosanopueblosobrano/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/cartilla-de-formacic3b3n-nro-2-cloc-vc-py.pdf>; <http://www.cloc-viacampesina.net/es/campanas/campana-basta-de-violencia-contra-las-mujeres>

practices towards women and expressions of explicit sexism. For example, according to the majority of the women interviewed, there is still a difference in the way opinions are valued, and “*in mixed spaces it is very difficult for women to speak and put their problems on the table - men restrict women’s dialogue.*”<sup>13</sup> In other words, there are still practices that exclude. Gender parity ensures participation but not the role of women as protagonists or women’s empowerment. Men’s words continue to be worth more and women are seen as ‘complementary’.

A second difficulty faced is that adult males do not recognise themselves as in need of training, as they consider themselves to have greater knowledge than women and young people. Since there are more women participating in the gender training school, the debate on equality between men and women is being postponed to a certain extent. The view still exists that gender is secondary to class struggle, and the tendency is to subsume women’s grievances in more general demands. In theory the male leaders “accept” the gender proposals, but they have not managed to put into practice the specific platforms necessary to question inequalities and the traditional sexual division of labour.

Another challenge is that in indigenous and rural communities in Latin America it can be hard to talk about feminism and the word gender is not properly understood. It is often criticised by using an inappropriate term common to the rural world associating feminism with lesbianism. Some of the women interviewed pointed out that they still face comments in their communities in reference to feminism saying that it will destroy the family and the heterosexual couple, and that this will affect family-based agricultural production.<sup>14</sup> It is also a challenge to resolve the tension between gender equality and the duality or complementary roles in indigenous cosmovision, which has been used to value the ancestral such as respect for the family and the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth), but that exclude development for women. These dual notions need to be revised, in a search of the connotation of equality.

### **Strategies and recommendations for the future**

In closing this article the author presents the CLOC women leaders’ main strategies as well as recommendations arising from the process of writing this case

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mirta Coronel. MOCASE. Santiago del Estero Peasant Movement (Movimiento Campesino de Santiago del Estero) Argentina.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/BRIDGEsocialmovement> or <http://vimeo.com/bridgesocialmovements/videos>

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Esperanza Carmona from Honduras, Mirta Coronel from Argentina and Cynthia González, from Paraguay. Links as above.

study. CLOC-VC's Women's Network has come to consensus on concrete actions to take in advancing towards gender equality, some of which have already begun and others which remain as aspirations.

For the women leaders, rural popular feminism is a proposal for building politically within the movement. It should not be seen as an imposition. It implies self-acceptance as women who are proud of themselves, want equality and are struggling to overcome abuse. They are giving themselves the opportunity to think differently, not feel inferior, value themselves and demand respect. All these elements are important in building a new society, taking the debate into organisations, defending and resisting. Rural popular feminism is not against men, rather it is against the patriarchal and capitalist system.

Since patriarchy is a long standing problem, the Women's Network aims to raise awareness that will enable people to see the inequality that is naturalised at present in cultural constructions of the family, in organisations and in society at large. This means denouncing injustice and transforming daily behaviour such as unbridled male sexuality, expressed in crude comments and other forms of sexual harassment. It also means addressing the sexual division of the word and hence questioning the non-democratic use of speech in meetings; since men generally speak first, they often mark out the conditions for debate.

Looking to the future, CLOC-VC still faces the challenge of taking its declarations from discourse into concrete practices. Organised rural women are convinced that the future is promising, as there is no possibility for going backwards on their advances and triumphs, much less in women's awareness. Gender equality leads to other equalities, "as a domino effect", and for this reason it must always be present in all training and organisational processes.

The challenges mentioned by the women leaders interviewed have implications in terms of acquiring the experience, learning and pedagogical methods needed to be able to turn their communities around on gender equality. This means training men, incorporating them in debates with women and young people so that they manage to understand that women only want access to the same choices. These choices include women being in both the private and public spheres, working and generating their own income, having elected positions in their organisation, educating their children, ensuring the inclusion of equality as a genuine priority and not as a response to momentary issues, valuing the territorial sovereignty of the

body, speaking of sexual and reproductive rights and defending the right to diverse sexual orientations.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, based on this research it seems that CLOC-VC is a movement that has managed to incorporate the demand for gender equality into the Latin American rural world, even when it was not included in its original definitions. This change has come from systematic, constant work by visionary women filled with conviction, who have progressed enormously but who have no doubt in recognising the challenges that remain. These future challenges faced by the movement have implications in both internal and external dynamics. To confront patriarchy “from within” means to recognise that masculine superiority is a myth, and that the ability to be generous and let go of privileges needs to be developed. Until now women have taken on leadership in circulating this vision and raising awareness among men and women leaders, but this struggle requires the equal involvement of all.

The main recommendation for the internal workings of the movement is to educate in small groups for joint reflection in order to give political depth to this approach. This can be an alternative that enables people to take ownership of the issues that have been difficult to address in large assemblies. This means holding workshops, informal conversational events, forums and more personalised communications actions, as well as chatting around the fireplace or stove on a daily basis.

In the external work of the movement, we need to ensure that gender is a cross-cutting theme, making strong links between the focal issues of the movement, such as food sovereignty, agrarian reform and agro-ecology, and the principles of equality between men and women, identifying obstacles and revealing inequalities in practices and in discourse. For example, the agenda for recognising the important role of women in conserving seeds must advance towards an agenda of co-responsibility, genuine integration and equal opportunities and rights. In issues of land tenure it is important to denounce the non-involvement of women, something addressed by the women of CLOC-VC’s slogan: *“With women home to stay, agrarian reform is delayed”*.

The key to change lies in preparing men and women for wide ranging debate, while giving them a diversity of tools to do so. Some recommendations include, for example, recuperating rural women’s history in order to value it; designing an alert system for practices that exclude or discriminate against people; and incorporating men into the teams that lead campaigns opposing violence against women. Since

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Lourdes Huanca (Peru), Loyda Olivo (Ecuador), Adriana Mezdari (Brazil), Esperanza Cardona (Honduras) and Cinthya Gonzalez (Paraguay).

everything is in a permanent process of construction, the women of CLOC-VC are open to hope and change, leading men in the movement towards raising, with similar conviction, the banners of gender equality and equal opportunities.

### **Further information**

Video interviews with seven CLOC women leaders:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/BRIDGEsocialmovement> and  
<http://vimeo.com/bridgesocialmovements/videos>

Via Campesina: <http://viacampesina.org/en/>

CLOC: [www.cloc-viacampesina.net](http://www.cloc-viacampesina.net)

CLOC campaign on seeds:

[http://www.biodiversidadla.org/Principal/Otros\\_Recursos/Campana\\_Semillas\\_de\\_Identidad - Por la defensa de la Biodiversidad y la Soberania Alimentaria;](http://www.biodiversidadla.org/Principal/Otros_Recursos/Campana_Semillas_de_Identidad_-_Por_la_defensa_de_la_Biodiversidad_y_la_Soberania_Alimentaria)

CLOC campaign on food sovereignty:

<http://conamuri.org.py/alimentosanopueblosobrano/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/cartilla-de-formacic3b3n-nro-2-cloc-vc-py.pdf>

CLOC campaign on violence against women: [http://www.cloc-](http://www.cloc-viacampesina.net/es/campanas/campana-basta-de-violencia-contra-las-mujeres)

[viacampesina.net/es/campanas/campana-basta-de-violencia-contra-las-mujeres](http://www.cloc-viacampesina.net/es/campanas/campana-basta-de-violencia-contra-las-mujeres)

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<http://socialmovements.bridge.ids.ac.uk>