Gender and Education

ISSN: 0954-0253 (Print) 1360-0516 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgee20

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To cite this article: Sônia Fátima Schwendler & Lucia Amaranta Thompson (2017) An education in gender and agroecology in Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement, Gender and Education, 29:1, 100-114, DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2016.1221596

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1221596

Published online: 20 Sep 2016.

GENDER AND EDUCATION, 2017
VOL. 29, NO. 1, 100–114
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1221596

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

An education in gender and agroecology in Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the implications of a blended agroecology and gender education within *Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement* (MST). The discussion is first situated within MST's struggle for land and for peasant families' livelihoods, generally, and under neoliberalism, specifically. Central to the struggle against neoliberalism have been critical educational models that evolved towards agroecology and a gender-equality-oriented pedagogy. Women have played important roles in the movement's growth, particularly the development of the education sector. Using data from a literature review, observations, and interviews, the article argues that MST's education, focused on agroecology and accompanied by gender-oriented pedagogy, empowers women and men to disrupt the traditional sexual division of labour in rural communities, and within land struggles, more generally.

KEYWORDS
Gender; education; MST; agroecology; neoliberalism; empowerment

Introduction

This article explores gender and agroecology education within Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), Latin America's and Brazil's most prominent agrarian reform movement. We begin with a discussion of the movement's inception and purpose, tracing it from the 1980s to current struggles under hegemonic neoliberal agricultural production. We then explain the emergence of MST's education model rooted in a Gramscian counter-hegemonic education influenced by emancipatory pedagogies (Freire 1973; Pistrak 1981; Makarenko 2005). In response to neoliberalism and women's involvement in the movement, the education model has evolved to emphasise *agroecology*, 'the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agricultural ecosystems' (Altieri 2009, 103), and *gender-oriented pedagogy*; a political and pedagogical proposal in which dominant gender ideologies and roles are intentionally and strategically contested within the school environment (Schwendler 2013). Women's roles in the evolution of the movement and the education model are woven into the discussion of how workers' gender relations have been affected by the evolving MST education model.

Data include a literature review, observations, and oral history interviews with students and staff from *Instituto Educar*,[1] a secondary technical school, in an MST settlement. The

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data illustrate how gender-oriented pedagogy creates an educational environment emphasising egalitarian gender practices. This environment stresses reflection on gender asymmetries, their historic (re)production within cultures, and the possibilities for gender equality. It also translates to a long-term political and educational strategy of deconstructing hegemonic gendered *habitus* in and out of school (Schwendler 2013). We argue that MST's education, focused on agroecology and accompanied by gender-oriented pedagogy, empowers women and men and disrupts the traditional sexual division of labour in rural communities, and within land struggles, more generally.

The context

Peasant social movements, notably the MST, have forced the Brazilian State to address historical inequalities in land ownership (Fernandes 1999; Carter 2009). The occupation of land and the organisation of encampments by the peasant movement led to the creation of over 9070 settlements between 1979 and 2012, on non-productive land of former landed estates as areas of agrarian reform with a social function: to provide livelihoods for landless families. This political strategy of land occupation is based on the 1964 Brazilian Land Statute and 1988 Constitution that states that the government can expropriate land if it is not 'serving its social function' (Wright and Wolford 2003), providing legitimacy to the occupation of non-productive lands. The Brazilian Government responded by converting the settled estates into peasant territories, populated by 933,836 families (NERA 2013).

As landless workers settled their families education was needed for children and to reduce high rates of illiteracy among adults. Although a public education is provided by municipalities and the State, it has usually been disengaged from the land struggle. Additionally, children from encampments and settlements faced discrimination in urban public schools (Camini 2009). Thus since MST's inception in 1984, education has been central to the broader struggle for land.

MST's education evolved from a Gramscian *counter-hegemonic model* emphasising a resistance against dominance over forms of knowledge and power of one group over another. The MST model also draws from emancipatory pedagogies including Pistrak (1981), Makarenko (2005), and Freire (1973). Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has become an instrument within the curriculum, encouraging students '… to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire 1973, 17). The model and pedagogy root landless workers in a collective, dynamic social struggle that shapes knowledge and develops a culture of participation (Caldart 2000). Women have played a major role within MST's education sector, officially created in 1987. Paradoxically, by occupying traditional feminine spaces such as schools, women have accessed higher education and increased their participation and leadership in different areas of the social movement such as agricultural production (Schwendler 2013).

This article is based on a case study of Educar, an agroecological secondary-level technical school[2] founded in 2005 by the MST, in collaboration with the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Rio Grande do Sul, Sertão and the National Programme of Education in Agrarian Reform Areas – *PRONERA*. The latter was founded in 1998, as a response to demands by the Brazilian peasant movement, which has been

key in addressing illiteracy in the agrarian reform settlements and has provided access to technical and higher education for the landless youth. It gives financial support for institutional partnerships between agrarian social movements and educational institutions (Molina 2003).

Educar is located in the *Assentamento Nossa Senhora Aparecida*, on the former *Latifundium do Annoni (*Annoni landed estate) and situated in the municipality of Pontão. The Annoni, located in the southern state of *Rio Grande do Sul*, was the first mass-land occupation undertaken by the MST and is considered a symbol of resistance. 'Annoni provided the sustenance and strength that the movement needed in order to become constituted as an entity' (J. P. MST's former national leader, Annoni settler, interview 2011[3]).

The search for alternatives: resisting the neoliberal model of production

The MST emerged in response to early iterations of neoliberalism in commodity production that began during the military dictatorship (1964–1985). These included the increasing concentration of land and mechanisation of agriculture which made countless landless peasants redundant, resulting in forced migration to urban areas to seek a living. For those landless workers that remained their only choice was to occupy unproductive landed estates, many of them acquired by landowners through the historical practice of *grillagem*[4] (Stedile and Fernandes 1999).

Still at its inception, the MST created cooperatives that adopted capitalist modes of production including large-scale production techniques (MST 1991). The rationale was that by working collectively to increase production, the families would be able to increase competitiveness. Some cooperatives were successful, such as the COOPTAR (*Cooperativa de Produção Agropecuaria Cascata Ltda*), located in the Annoni. The majority failed. Neoliberal approaches to commodity production based on limited state intervention in the market further exacerbated MST members' struggles. For MST member farms, this translated to reduced State support which in turn meant reduced ability to compete against large agribusiness. Alternatives had to be found to resist neoliberalism.

The MST has challenged neoliberal structures of inequality through the experience of collectivisation. By sharing resources and working as a community, the MST has rejected neoliberal notions of individualisation and market forces that presumably bring about a 'natural' balance where those who simply 'work hard' succeed. It has also challenged the concentration of power and resources, ideally distributing both equally to all sectors of the movement.

Nevertheless, as part of the patriarchal culture strongly ingrained in the countryside, men were in the great majority of encampments and settlements' general coordination when the Annoni was first occupied.

> The women were the ones who most participated in the encampment (in) education, health, nutrition and the distribution of clothing … Women have always participated. The only difference was that when the direction recruited members, it was the men that applied … The men themselves said that, when it came to the political roles it had to be a man, not a woman. (I. V., Educar staff and regional leader)

The MST changed its organisational structure in 2000 to create more space for political participation. During this (re)organisation, women challenged the movement to address

persistent gender constraints within the land struggle. This led to an increase in women's participation in different sectors and levels of organisation. This is elaborated later in the article.

Contrary to the neoliberal agricultural emphasis on food as commodity, MST adopted a food sovereignty model (Tardin and Kenfield 2009), which emphasises food production for local consumption and a critique of 'what food is produced, where it is produced, how it is produced and at what scale' (Desmarais 2003, 142). In 2000, the MST also adopted agroecology to orient production to resist neoliberalism in addition to food sovereignty. Altieri (2009) argues that the combination of modern agroecological science and indigenous knowledge systems developed by farmers, NGOs, and some government and academic institutions has been shown to improve food security whilst preserving natural resources, biodiversity, soil, and water. M. S. C., (Settler and Educar teacher) highlights the need for agroecology explicitly and food sovereignty implicitly:

> … to re-assess the issue of smallholder agriculture and if we want to save the planet, be healthy, we have to develop … technology in this area. There are no studies or research because everything is focused on/aimed at the large agricultural businesses rather than agroecology that focuses on life. You have to invest in order to make it feasible for people to live in the countryside …

Agroecological education against neoliberalism

Since 2000, the MST in conjunction with other rural social movements, have institutionalised agroecological education. Schools, such as Educar, with a focus on agroecology have provided a younger generation of landless settlers and small farmers. The programme of study 'articulates practice and theory into a praxis, and finds expression in times and spaces that alternate between the school and property, community, settlement, camp or social movement to which the student is linked' (Ribeiro 2008, 3). Through an alternating pedagogy, students spend three months at school *(tempo escola*) followed by three months at home, referred to as community time (*tempo comunidade*) over three years. During school time, students develop their theoretical and practical knowledge visiting agroecology projects across the state.

> The state educational institutions take the students on 3 or 4 field trips throughout the whole three years of the course and we do three field trips every phase (year). We take them so that they can see the viability of being a smallholder. We take them to see everything that there is in the state related to agroecology. (M. S. C., Educar staff, interview 2015)

Community time encourages students to maintain local relationships, a pedagogic space to engage in local discussions related to their settlement. Students also obtain practical experience supervised by a community leader, which can be brought back to school as hybrid scientific and peasant social knowledge. The programme is based on Freire's statement that '[i]f education alone cannot transform society, without it society cannot change either' (2000, 67). The MST advocates that the school must be involved in the transformation of the countryside. Thus school curriculum has been developed to intentionally contribute towards the political and ideological development of its students (MST 1996), encouraging them to contest material realities and capitalist relations of production.

By focusing on agroecological education, the MST aims to transform students into organic intellectuals, capable of 'influencing agricultural production by advancing counter-hegemonic agricultural practices' (Meek 2015, 1180). According to Gramsci, every social group creates 'one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields' (1971, 5). Students remain in the countryside as MST activists devoted to improving the quality of life in their communities through an alternative matrix of production.

While the two-pronged education model seems a strong fit to counter neoliberalism, C.R., an alumni and current staff member of Educar, explains the difficulty of implementing food sovereignty blended with agroecology in the settlements.

> For me, agroecology is fundamental, because it is life that is in play … It is difficult because people here have the concept of agriculture for export. 'I go there, I farm, I place the poison and then I harvest' … the less they need to do the better … Today, people are not paying attention to the importance of having a healthy diet, or the equilibrium in nature.

Opposition to the implementation of agroecology is mainly based on the assumption that the new model places heavier demands on the farmers. Additionally, it is also related to the community's exposure to the concept of production and food as commodities. Government agroecological projects and assistance might ease the insertion of new ideas and lead to a questioning of the hegemonic norms of production by the community.

> Where there is already organic production, agroecological projects or even the Food Acquisition Programme[5] or the National School Meals Programme (that are government programmes), the young find it easier to develop projects related to the field of the course. But where there is a predominance of monoculture the conflict arises. (M.S.C., Educar staff, interview, 2015)

Despite the difficulties faced by the new generations when introducing alternative economic practices in their communities, agroecological education has become an important tool, not only to dispute the hegemonic agricultural and developmental model but also to empower women to challenge the patriarchal gender regimes in the countryside.

Women's struggle to contest hegemonic norms

Women's work continues to be invisible, undervalued, and accepted simply as a 'helping hand', despite the fact that, historically, women's agricultural activities have played a major role within peasant economies, ensuring food sovereignty and biodiversity (Faria 2009). Activities carried out by women were seen as an extension of their domestic work, with the home institutionalised as the 'women's natural place' (Alvarez 1990; Silva and Portella 2006; Jacobs 2010). As a consequence a wide range of unpaid labour that generates goods and services for family consumption have been disregarded (Schwendler 2013).

The family was seen by the social movement and government development policy as a unit and a site in which all members benefit equally from any resources received, leading to policy blindness and exacerbating patriarchy within family structures (Deere 2003). Implicit patriarchal gender regimes within the social constructs of the movement meant that men were not only considered the head of the household, but also the main agricultural worker and, therefore, the rightful land-title holder.

Family structure had a significant impact on policy development, household decision-making, and the organisation of the social movement. Silva and Portella (2006) demonstrate that women's position as 'helper' does not give them the same legitimate place and experience to make decisions on agricultural issues as men. Elson and Pearson (2011) also show that women have not been full members of society, thus making it even more difficult to access resources that increase social and economic power and independence. One example is women's land rights in the agrarian reform programme. The 1964 Land Statute supported the redistribution of land towards the family unit:

> At the time even we, as women, did not think that a piece of land would be put under both our names … That was never even discussed. To the point that in our encampment [the Encruzilhada Natalino, in 1981] there were no young people or women registered [to get access to land titles], only men … (M.S.C., Educar staff)

As a consequence of women's organisation at the Annoni settlement, the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution established that for land distributed via agrarian reform 'titles of ownership and use rights should be granted in the name of men, women, or both, independently of their marital status.' M.D., a leader in the Annoni settlement, explains:

> There was an organised movement in the Annoni for single women to be recognised as citizens with the same rights and duties of men … It was the MST, the struggle of women who ended up raising a conscience.

Up until the legislation for women's land rights became compulsory in 2003 (Ordinance 981/2003), only 13% of land beneficiaries were women (Butto and Hora 2010).

Whilst, the changes in gender policy have led to an increase of women taking part in the MST's production sector, women still face enormous barriers and struggle to position themselves as subjects with the power to put forward their ideas and make decisions (Schwendler 2013). This is clearly described by I.M.L., (Educar staff, Annoni settler):

> In terms of finance [and] production, we have many women that are reluctant to enter these spheres … Even men resist women's entrance because it is a sphere that they control … Women really need to be educated and trained within this area.

Women's empowerment and agroecology education

Education has empowered young women within their communities and within the social movement itself. Empowerment is defined in this paper as a process that requires challenging the ideologies that validate social inequality, the patterns of access to and control over economic, natural, and intellectual resources, and the institutions and structures that (re)produce existing power relations (Batliwala 1997).

This is important, not only because of women's historically unequal access to productive resources, services and knowledge in comparison to men, but also because of the impact that neoliberal agricultural policies have had on women's livelihood and culture. E.P., (PRONERA agronomy graduate, MST leader) expresses how important education has been for her to access MST's productive sector: 'If I did not have this knowledge I would struggle to find the space to participate'. This is also emphasised by I.M.L. (Educar staff).

> We have many women in the movement that have technical education that they master very well and then they take up the challenge of entering this space … The rest of the militant women, me included, do not go there a lot, which is due to limitations in our own education … The movement has sought to create more formal [technical] courses. Where … there are many women participating.

These personal experiences demonstrate that access to formal education, particularly agroecology and politics, is crucial to the transformation of gender relations. Around 20–25% of Educar students are women. Despite the small percentage of female participation, these women have gone on to occupy important positions within sectors of the movement that had historically been dominated by men in both the encampments and settlements. Women's involvement in the educational field, as teachers, and their access to higher education has also enabled them to take part in the MST's national leadership. These women have also been empowered by their participation in MST gatherings, such as the *Jornada da Agroecologia* (carried out to promote alternative economic practices), as well as in the peasant women's resistance movement against monoculture known as the *Jornada de Luta Contra o Agronegócio* (which takes places on International Women's Day).

Landless women also increased their gender awareness through contact with feminist concepts of gender equality and rights, as well as their participation in the autonomous Rural Women Workers' Movement or within the MST's structure.

> We are trying to construct a more revolutionary feminism, to get both men and women involved in the debate. We are increasing the level of women's participation by ensuring that in the organisational structure there is one woman and one man [at each level]. […] she will be able to participate in various activities, not just meetings, but also studies and analyses of the crises, which are moments in the struggle that politicise the landless workers. So it is one more [woman] that is managing to convey her opinion, make an analysis to be able to come back into the community and talk [with authority]. (J.S., Educar staff)

Women's participation in the transnational peasant movement, the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organisation (CLOC) and *Via Campesina*,[6] has empowered them to demand the adoption of feminism within the land struggle. This is significant considering that in the 1980s and early 1990s, feminism was taboo, identified as a *petit bourgeois* ideology and synonymous with machismo, particularly in communities where the church had a strong influence.

Since the late 2000s, participants of women's' peasant movements at a national and international level started to advocate peasant and popular feminism based on the Pedagogy of the Oppressed ingrained within the peasant culture (Schwendler 2014). They demanded a gender-oriented MST struggle and agroecological education. 'In my opinion, agroecology is about more than the production of food. It is a way of life and it is why the issue of gender has everything to do with agroecology, as well as social justice and socialism' (M.S.C., Educar staff, interview 2015). This engagement with and in feminism led to the adoption of gender parity in 2000, which stipulated that every *base-nucleus* (a small group of families) in encampments and settlements must be coordinated by one man and one woman. Later, this norm was also adopted in MST's entire organisational structure. However, the women's movement within the MST had struggled many years for the establishment of gender parity at the national level.

These changes are not uniform and do not affect all landless women in the same way. Still gender education has been viewed as essential to overcoming the persistence of countryside patriarchal structures. Rural women are affected differently depending on the gender regime they have been exposed to and the opportunities they have had to challenge them (Walby 1997). The next section will explore how formal educational offerings, including the Educar Institute, are seen and used by the MST's feminist activists as a forum through which gender inequalities can be taken into consideration and addressed.

Challenging existing gender discourse through education

This section analyses how the MST's pedagogical approach supports gender parity and women's empowerment. There are three main reasons why the MST's gender-oriented pedagogy at Educar supports gender equity in the broader movement discussed in the pages that follow. First, debates and discussions about gender relations are intentionally incorporated into the school curriculum. Second, women and men are involved in the same work practices, challenging the sexual division of labour. Third, women learn the technical knowledge needed to participate in agroecological production.

Gender-oriented curriculum

A gender-oriented pedagogy is shaped by and shapes the environment in which it is located. In the MST's case it is grounded in feminist theory, alongside Marxist theory and critical pedagogy. It aims to simultaneously contest the hegemonic mode of production and patriarchal culture through a counter-hegemonic education based on the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. An important instance of education is the intentional production of counter-cultures, connected to ideologies that contest oppressive capitalist and gender relations. For instance, in MST schools, everyday lessons are preceded by a *mística*, which is a performance through words, art, symbolism, and music that portrays the struggles and reality of the movement, serving as 'pedagogy of empowerment' (Issa 2007, 126). Gender awareness and the production of a counter-hegemonic culture is also developed through this performative instance of education.

Additionally, Educar intentionally introduced into the curriculum discussions about the historic (re)production of gender asymmetries within society in general and peasant culture in particular. Debates probe the possibilities to overcome the sexual division of labour and persistent gender hierarchies in the countryside.

> Gender issues are debated in the day to day political education of the school; in seminars, readings and debates in many classes such as: Portuguese language, art, history, geography, sociology, philosophy in the technical course. In the agronomy course it is also worked on every day, in their political education, in the boarding school and in the module: Introduction to Social Thinking, in seminars, reading, debates and other activities in the course. (M.S.C., Educar staff, interview 2015)

Educar understands the importance of raising gender awareness through different strategies, which includes both theoretical analysis and practical experiences, in which students are challenged to undertake gender-oriented collaborative work and attitudes.

The MST's educational project rejects the separation between intellectual and manual labour. Inspired by Pistrak (1981), the movement takes education for work and through work as essential to its pedagogical proposal (MST 1996). For instance, all manual tasks necessary for a school to function are considered key mechanisms of the learning process. Students are responsible for daily tasks ranging from, managing the class schedule and facilitating classroom discussions to cleaning up the entire school and managing disciplinary issues. In addition, they are responsible for the cultivation of food and rearing of animals for consumption within the school, which also becomes part of the practical understanding of agroecology. 'Rather than schools simply being "ideological apparatuses," as in Althusser's conception, MST schools are also spaces of work that allow for alternative social relations of production to develop' (Tarlau 2013, 12), which also includes gender relations.

Challenging the sexual division of labour

Another critical pedagogic principle adopted by Educar is educating students as members of a collective, with the collective co-responsible for educating the collective (Caldart 2004). Inspired by Makarenko's perspective of education (2005), the MST organises its schools through *base nuclei*. These are small student collectives that are the organisational base of Educar. Through them, students organise their activities, develop their tasks, and produce collective studies. All issues are discussed and resolved within them. Base nuclei contest individualism and create a culture of cooperation (MST 1996). What is important from a gender perspective is that through this collective organisation the school challenges the sexual division of labour as all members carry out all activities.

> We have an organisation where the work is distributed amongst the girls and boys who are then collectively responsible for these chores. Each group rotates between chores during each phase of the course, that way they all get to experience all areas of work. (M.S.C., Educar staff, interview 2015)

The school has also developed discussions on gender issues to guide students in facing their gendered habitus. The school's egalitarian structures attempt to introduce new structures and ways of working to the students. M. P. (Educar student), states that 'At school there is a strong focus [on gender issues]. We are organised in groups, there is always one woman and one man, in terms of work outside (production) without having any kind of differentiation.' There is also an attempt to challenge assumptions that students have of women's and men's work, and to teach that gender roles are constructed socially and culturally, which means that they can be deconstructed. However, for some students, especially boys, who have been raised within conservative peasant culture, it can be a shock to work within these more gender egalitarian structures.

> It is a huge shock, the youth are brought up within very conservative peasant families, where there always existed a division between a woman's and man's place. (M.P., Educar student)

The nature of the school and studies mean that both men and women are included within this feminist education. As the imposition of power is based on the domain of knowledge and experience, the school teaches students how to contribute within and outside the agricultural home regardless of gender.

> One of the things that helps people develop here at the school is making everyone learn how to do everything. Whoever comes here leaves a completely different person… (T.S., Staff and former Educar student)

Although more egalitarian gendered authority patterns emerge from the MST's formal education, this has to work alongside the continuous reproduction of a hegemonic and patriarchal sexual divisions of labour, particularly within the organisation of the student's family. C. R., staff member and former student at Educar, discusses the difficulties in challenging hegemonic patterns of gender in the family:

> We hardly learn anything at home, all my knowledge about gender was learned here [in school]. Here we are divided into base nuclei and we all have to do something, does not matter whether we are men or women… Within the family unit, if you are a boy, you are not going to wash the dishes for your mum… In here it is easy because everybody contributes, but when you go back into the community, people ask what us students do … and then they kind of mock you, 'oh so you guys are washing pans'.

In social struggles, mobilisations, marches, mass demonstrations, and informal education or other spaces of formation, women and men share different tasks more easily, but when they go back to their local spaces (the community and the family) it is more difficult for them to continue with this dynamic (Schwendler 2013). The student expresses his awareness:

> We work on this in school, and we incorporate this ideologically, it is important to not have gender inequality, and you realise that sometimes you find it hard to change, you reproduce. The idea is to maintain that equality present, even in the family, otherwise you will just fall back into the daily routine and forget. (M. P. Educar student)

M.S.C. (Educar staff), emphasises that students are changing their assumptions and attitudes due to the gender education developed by Educar. Nevertheless, 'it does not mean that after a few debates, studies and assignments … the problem has been solved. Gender issues have to be experienced and confronted in the day to day'. Therefore, the Educar's alternating methodology is crucial, as students need to confront the principles of a gender education not only during the school time but also during the community time.

The transformation of gender relations, within this context, has to include the participation of male students as they are part of patriarchal social dynamics in the countryside. Additionally, many men/boys are open to challenges to ingrained assumptions about gender. Following is an example of how Male *Educar* students showed awareness in interviews of gendered dynamics by discussing the unequal division of work within the household and the devaluation of their own mothers work.

> I am not as self-conscious as I used to be… I used to sweep the floor at home and then somebody would arrive, a colleague, another women, I used to sort of hide in order to not be seen doing [housework], because I was convinced that that work just was not for me. Later on [after starting school], people would arrive and I would just continue [with the housework]… I help my mother do her chores … she is on her own, even today I help her when I go back home… (C. R., Alumni and Current Educar Staff)

Despite gender awareness of more equal relations, there is a discourse that still reproduces traditional gender patterns, in which domestic chores taken on by men are usually judged

as help, as they are considered women's responsibilities, with less social value. Similarly, as discussed previously, women's agricultural work is still regarded as help, as it is considered a male territory.

C.C.S. (Educar Student) discusses how the gender pedagogy at Educar has changed his own attitudes towards housework. Additionally, he expresses how he is able to communicate these ideas back into the community, which in turn has led to other males attempting to change dynamics within their homes as well.

> I have a friend who, once, when I was cleaning my house, asked, '…and your sister, what is she doing?'… [I responded] 'I am cleaning the house and she is doing other chores: her schoolwork'… then we had a conversation and he would say 'the women must do this and the man that' we continued to talk and he was kind of [thinking about it]. The next day I went to his house and he was washing the dishes.

Challenging gender roles through agroecological education

The school seeks to challenge these structures of rigid sexual divisions of labour that historically have relegated women to a secondary role in work, political activities, and community organisations, making them 'naturally' responsible for the domestic and care work (Schwendler 2003).

> In the beginning, I thought that the course was just for men … most classes have a majority of men. Sometimes, women stop themselves [from doing things] 'ah, let's leave the men to do this.' (the heavy work for the men and the lighter for the women).… Everyone has the same ability. (C.R., Alumni and Current Educar staff)

This notion of 'heavy'/men's and 'light'/women's work is a cultural construction, in which the type of work is identified by the gender of the person who does it. Agricultural labour performed by women is usually considered 'lighter' than the 'heavier' productive work performed by men, even though it involves the same amount of time and effort (Paulilo 1987). The way in which the value of labour is gendered is also influenced by the use of technologies. For instance, the shift of production from family consumption to production for the market implies the use of more advanced agricultural technologies, such as the tractor, which has been associated to 'male's farm identity and power' (Brandth 1995, 113).

'The issue is that the boys come with some practical experience [of agricultural technologies], whereas the girls learn here' (J.S., Educar staff). J. S., Educar staff, states that despite some limits that girls face in the agroecological school, the major problems occur when they go back to the communities 'The issues arise when back in the settlement, where they do not trust women… or believe that they are capable.'

Patriarchal culture still resists shifts in the sexual division of labour in local communities and families. T.C. (Educar student) also reports how difficult it is for young women to teach agroecology in the community.

> Well, I work with men and women. But because I am a woman and young, the men do not have a lot of faith in me. I could even be very knowledgeable, but they prefer men. We know, and try to communicate firmly, but for them, we do not really know what we are doing.

The MST had the intention of bringing forward the gender debate due to the evident need within the settlements.

> It was evident that in our territories *machista* attitudes and ideas are prevalent, as well as the oppression of women. The value of this is that our movement is dedicated to addressing this debate, confronting the situation of the existing internal issues, which allows progression in term of our gender awareness… (M.S.C., Educar staff, interview 2015)

Despite its limits, education has been seen by the MST activists as an important space for the new generation of landless workers to develop skills and acquire the knowledge necessary to produce a counter-hegemonic culture based on gender equality and sustainable peasant agriculture.

> The pedagogic method in the school is an instrument that facilitates criticism and the ability to confront our own limitations with confidence and resolve. Psychoanalysis also helps us to recognise human richness as well as limitations and therefore deconstruct ideas, especially those of oppression and *machismo.* (M.S.C., Educar staff, interview 2015)

Regardless of the gender of the student, challenges will surface when entering back into the community. Being able to re-enter the school environment, discuss these issues and get feedback on how to address and confront these challenges means that the ability to question gender relations is continuously reinforced in the student.

Conclusion

This article argued that MST's education, focused on agroecology and accompanied by gender-oriented pedagogy, empowers women and men and disrupts the traditional sexual division of labour in rural communities, and within land struggles, more generally.

MST's principle objectives are to counteract neoliberal economic and political models that threaten rural livelihoods, forcing peasant communities to leave their territories. The MST struggle was for land redistribution and the transformation of the agrarian system. It initially attempted to resist neoliberalism by forming cooperatives and applying capitalist modes of production. However, they found that it was very difficult to compete with large agribusiness. For this reason, the MST sought alternatives to subsist 'outside' of the hegemonic agricultural market. The only way to do so was to seek more sustainable and independent forms of production including food sovereignty and agroecology.

Education, while a foundational element of the movement, is crucial to the dissemination of these alternative practices to a new generation. The MST formed technical schools that provided students with the skills to carry out agroecology and opportunities to go back to their communities and implement alternative projects, which have not always been accepted. The alternating pedagogy allows the school to participate, guiding the students in the whole process of implementation of agroecology projects in the community. Permitting the school to provide feedback and help students overcome hurdles to the gender-oriented pedagogies learned and practiced at school. This not only serves as a learning process for the students but also for the school, which is able to refine the ways in which it is able to support students.

As women struggles for equal status, they used the spaces that were available within the movement to open up other spaces in which they could further a women's equality agenda and introduce a feminist discourse. Women's input has been crucial to the development of MST's education, agroecology, and the introduction of food sovereignty. Additionally, women have challenged entrenched gender norms through MST education.

A gender-oriented pedagogy creates a space to empower the younger generations to address systemic inequalities. It includes discussion and practical implementations of gender equal practices designed to challenge students' conceptions of gender. Moreover, it has provided students with the tools to build new relationships and critically evaluate structures that may subordinate certain social groups. The last section has shown how, being able to spend periods of time in school and community, leads to student reflections and discussions around gender practices they are able to observe within their own communities. This allows the school to offer solutions and techniques that can help students maintain gender egalitarian practices and, in this way, continue to confront entrenched patriarchal dynamics within the community.

Cooperative pedagogies, that support collective and sustainable work practices, whilst incorporating gender discussions, are critical for disrupting gender relations because they challenge notions of the public-male and private-female separation of spaces so entrenched in many rural communities. The strength of this education is that it is relevant to everyday lives. Teaching young women to carry out 'male tasks' and vice versa creates a change in behaviour as well as thinking, an embodiment of discourse by students who then take these ideas and practices back into their communities.

Providing young women with agroecological knowledge has also been critical to their empowerment within communities and the social movement. This has, at the very least, allowed them to enter traditional male spaces with more autonomy and self-confidence.

Accessing education and raising gender consciousness is crucial to contest traditional gender roles, but these measures are insufficient unless it also involves the transformation of economic relations of production, and women's access to land, financial support, and technologies.

Funding

This research was supported by the University of London (Convocation Trust Appeal Fund for the Central Research Fund) and the CAPES Foundation, Ministry of Higher Education, Brazil.

Notes

1. *Instituto Educar* is referred to simply as Educar in the rest of the article, reflecting the colloquial name for the institute.
2. In addition to secondary-level education in 2014 Educar began an undergraduate agronomy course with the Federal University of Fronteira Sul, Erechim.
3. The interviewees are referred to by initials. All interviews were completed by Schwendler in 2011 unless specified otherwise.
4. The falsification of land titles.
5. This programme involves the purchase of organic food, seeds, milk by the government from the smallholders to be distributed for free to hospitals, community restaurants, etc.
6. Via Campesina is an international movement which joins peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous people, migrants, and agricultural workers from around the world (VIA Campesina 2011).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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