

Revalorization of Social Reproduction through Social and Solidarity Economy Practices

The feminist analysis of social and solidarity economy (SSE) practices in the six cases studied in the project (see box) has found that, in the face of destructive patriarchal capitalism, SSE practices may contribute to the valorization of women's work, strengthening of social ties, and the protection of life as such. Under certain conditions, SSE practices may also contribute to the formation of political subjects capable of challenging patriarchal capitalist structures towards greater recognition and more rights. While marked with challenges, SSE practices may thus form part of collective struggles for equitable and more sustainable societies.

The organization of social reproduction in capitalist societies

The organization of productive and reproductive activities in capitalist societies gives rise to hierarchies that have long been critiqued by feminist scholarship. These hierarchies privilege the production and accumulation of capital over social reproduction, in particular men's labour over women's work, obscuring the importance of social reproductive activities for the production of life and hence for the prosperity of capitalism itself.

In this sense, these hierarchies presuppose the existence of two separate and unequal spheres, a separation that has been contested in feminist studies. One productive, predominantly associated with activities carried out by men, and another, reproductive, associated with all activities and institutions required to maintain the household and society. Historically situated within the reproductive sphere or tied closely to it, women's work within this framework has come to be valued less than men's labour, creating as a result new forms of women's subordination.

While these hierarchies are as old as capitalism itself, they nevertheless are not static. The cases studied in this project show that globalization, and modernization discourses and practices—such as urbanization, and industrialization in agriculture and other sectors—mark a profound change in female and male social relations of production and social reproduction. Several of the cases studied found changes in women's work, with tasks traditionally carried out by men, or shared by men and women, opening up to or requiring more women's participation due to decline in "traditional" industries, change in women's role in the household, and industrial and technological innovation.

Box 1: Project Overview: Feminist Analysis of Social and Solidarity Economy Practices: Views from Latin America and India

Social and solidarity economy (SSE) has a potentially important role to play in reorienting economies and societies toward more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. But it can only be truly transformative if it also addresses the reorganization of social reproduction, integrating the political goals of gender equality and more equitable power relations. Are SSE practices moving in the right direction?

Even though women play a major role in SSE activities, until very recently the interest of both academics and policy makers in SSE has lacked a gender perspective. Feminist research on unpaid care and domestic work is only beginning to inform policy making and implementation on the ground, and SSE activities that relate to social reproduction (that is, by which society reproduces itself) are often under-recognized. The different social relationships and gender hierarchies at work in SSE typically lack a feminist analysis.

This research project aimed to contribute empirical evidence and analytical insights to begin filling these gaps in SSE research and policies from a feminist perspective.

India case studies

- Karnataka: Udupi fisherwomen association
- Kerala: SEWA domestic workers association
- Tamil Nadu: Women's organizations against sand quarries in Kancheepuram District, Palar Valley

Latin America case studies

- Argentina: Community organizations providing care services in suburbs of Buenos Aires
- Bolivia: Producer associations in Batallas, Department of La Paz
- Brazil: Agroecological and feminist collective production groups in Vale do Ribeira, State of São Paulo

The project was funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS). Find more information about the [project here](#).



In the rural areas studied in Bolivia (Batallas) for instance, the search for non-agricultural work has led to an increase in the number of men migrating from rural to urban areas in pursuit of new opportunities. As result, agriculture and animal husbandry activities, usually carried out by both men and women, have become increasingly feminized, and the number of women participating in peasant unions and producers' associations has also increased.

Industrialization in Tamil Nadu has led to the relative feminization of industrial labour and to a change in the notion of work itself. The over-exploitation of natural resources, for instance, has led young women to move from agriculture-related occupations into industrial ones, such as manual workers in textile, leather garment or agri-food industries, or into low-skilled services such as cleaners for private schools, which require different knowledge and skills to perform.

While such processes have expanded women's aspirations and opportunities, at least economically, the change in women's work within a space dominated by patriarchal capitalist logic has counterparts inherent in the deep structure of patriarchal capitalist societies that devalue women's economic activities. For instance, women's work is often perceived as a "service" rather than a labour. In such circumstances, women are not considered to be economic agents entitled to remuneration for their labour, or social rights, or protection and support of the state. On the contrary, their labour is perceived as a service to their families and communities by virtue of being women. "Naturalizing" women's labour in this way devalorizes women's productive activities. In this sense women's labour—care, selling fish, agricultural work, subsistence farming—joins the invisible sphere of social reproduction, rendering these economic activities analogous to domestic ones that are poorly valued and not considered as work contributing to the reproduction of life. This, in turn, "justifies" the low economic value ascribed to women's labour and the limited social protection from which women benefit.

Such perceptions and processes did not emerge in a vacuum. Feminist analysis finds them to be the product of the hierarchies embedded in capitalist societies. In this sense, female and male roles in production and social reproduction are typically regarded as a matter of fact, and not as an issue that requires analysis, public action and ultimately change. This, in turn, explains to some extent the limited institutional recognition of women's work, as well as the gendered worldviews that predominantly characterize the public policies and programmes put in place to support and empower women.

In the case of the rural region of Vale do Ribeira (Brazil) for instance, the value of motherhood occupies a central place in the social representation of women and in public policies. This is reflected, for example, in the discourses of social workers in the region studied and in the conditionalities associated with Bolsa Familia, a nationwide cash transfer programme, in which mothers are responsible for their chil-

dren's school attendance and vaccination in order to receive benefits. Furthermore, the training programmes for women beneficiaries of the Bolsa Familia tend to push women into presumed "female" activities such as beauty, fashion and cooking (while ignoring agriculture), reinforcing as such the existing sexual division of labour that gender inequality is based upon.

In Kerala, India, domestic work performed by women tends to be seen as an extension of the housework that housewives anyway perform as part of their duties as women. As a result of such perceptions, domestic workers are poorly valued (remunerated), poorly regulated, and largely left out of the purview of conventional labour laws.

Similar patterns and processes were also observed in the government support for women's associations in the case study in Argentina. Microfinance and government subsidies for social economy organizations, for instance, tend to exclude collective care services, and where support does exist, care workers tend to be poorly remunerated. This gendered perception of care work highlights the productive bias of public policies for SSE, which place reproductive activities in a secondary position.

This lack of recognition of women's work, whether agriculture, domestic, care or other work, has severe implications for women's lives and well-being. Women's engagement in precarious, poorly remunerated jobs with limited protection and rights makes them susceptible to exploitation and subsequently increases their vulnerabilities and dependency. The case studies found that due to unequal division of labour, inadequate social and care services, and persistent poverty, women are exhausted: they lack sleep, and are developing health problems early on. The pressures of juggling productive and reproductive activities also mean that women have limited spare time for leisure, or for social mobilization. This may ultimately restrict their ability to get involved and participate in alternative political or social movements that strive to meet their needs, but also to change underlying structural conditions.



Members of the network of community care centres *El Encuentro*, Argentina. Photo: SOFAVIAL



Social reproduction: collective meal prepared by an SSE group in Vale do Ribeira, Brazil. Photo: Ch. Verschuur

SSE: A vehicle for the reorganization and revalorization of social reproduction

These micro dynamics reflect the larger crisis of social reproduction that characterizes capitalist societies. Neoliberal policies and practices, in particular the over-emphasis on economic growth, have severe implications for society and the environment. This economic model and the multiple crises accompanying it have shrunk investment in care, health and education; increased the precarity of the labour market; constrained social protection and rights; and degraded the natural environment—contributing, as a result, to poverty, inequalities and social discontent. In the cases studied, social and solidarity economy (SSE) practices have emerged in response to these conditions that characterize the “crisis of social reproduction” and the precarious livelihoods it produces.

SSE practices are embedded in local settings and are largely based on the needs, expectations, experiences and priorities of local participants. In the cases studied, these were women from marginalized communities. While social reproduction occupies a secondary position in capitalist societies, it is at the centre of all the (highly varied) SSE initiatives explored in the research. These initiatives simultaneously care for people and for the territory, ensuring the “enlarged reproduction of life” (that is, beyond mere subsistence [or biological reproduction], encompassing a morally acceptable minimum social quality of life as well). In so doing, they prioritize collective, social and at times environmental interests above material and individual ones. They deliver services (Argentina); strive towards environmental sustainability (Tamil Nadu; Brazil); ensure access to rights, such as the right to land (Bolivia; Brazil; Tamil Nadu), to food (Brazil; Karnataka; Tamil Nadu), to water (Brazil; Tamil Nadu) and to work (Karnataka); and promote worker’s rights, such as social security and protection (Kerala; Karnataka; Argentina). The SSE practices studied also create new social

relations, strengthen social ties among marginalized women and within the community, and, under certain conditions, change gender relations.

SSE practices also have the potential to reinstate “value” into women’s productive and reproductive activities and thus revalorize the social reproductive sphere as a whole, which tends to be invisible. As a result, SSE, under certain conditions, has the potential to overcome the false dichotomy between production and social reproduction as separate spheres, which has long been critiqued by feminist scholars. The domestic workers’ association studied in Kerala, for instance, is a movement for collectivizing and organizing socially and economically

disadvantaged women to claim their right to be engaged in paid employment under restricted circumstances and dominant patriarchal norms, which prevent women from undertaking paid jobs outside the household.

In Karnataka, the Udupi fisherwomen’s association not only engages with the state on women’s behalf, safeguarding their right to work as fish sellers in a patriarchal capitalist environment that threatens this source of livelihood for women; it also defends women’s economic and social rights, and strengthens social ties and solidarities among its members. It thus supports women both professionally and personally, with the solidarities forged between women serving various purposes both inside and outside the fish market. The women support each other in their everyday activities of managing the fish market and interacting with customers. Outside the market, solidarities between women enable support between families during times of need and crisis.

In the Argentina case study, the community associations of care workers guarantee access to rights such as food, education and recreation that the state does partially or does not guarantee. This process of de-familiarization and collectivization of care has led to the empowerment and increased politicization of marginalized women. It subsequently generated a transformation in their subjectivities and perception of themselves, their own work and their relationship vis-a-vis the state and society as a whole.

Although the impact on economic empowerment is still limited in the cases studied due to the low remuneration women receive for their work, these SSE practices have provided women with some material and symbolic advantages. SSE introduces alternative and to some extent counter-hegemonic practices and strategies that, under certain conditions, can be conducive to the reorganization of production and social reproduction and the empowerment of women.

Associativity as a form of organization and practice, for instance, may—under certain conditions—contribute to the revalorization of women’s work at the personal, familial, communal and political levels. At the personal level, associative practices create spaces of sociability outside of family relationships and the domestic sphere. These allow women to share their problems and receive moral support from other women. In the cases studied, such interactions broadened women’s perspectives and helped change the way they perceive themselves and value their own work. These spaces gradually allowed women to generate a view of the social scenario that was different from the domestic order, allowing them to redefine their understanding of work. These processes further allowed women to reposition themselves inside the family. Many as a result gained more autonomy in the administration of their time and resources, and increased their bargaining power, while others even managed to stop situations of domestic violence. The tasks of care performed by women as a collective granted them further recognition in their communities and placed them in a position of power. Under certain conditions, women became increasingly politicized and positioned in a struggle with the state and market powers for recognition. Politicization, and the development of political subjectivities within SSE, were found to be key to the struggle for livelihoods, recognition and equity.

Training, and concrete actions for measuring and quantifying the value of women’s work, also played an important role in the valorization process. For instance, in the case of domestic workers’ associations in Kerala, the training undertaken by women led to the professionalization of domestic work; this professionalization contributed, in turn, to the recognition and subsequent revalorization of domestic work. Similar processes were observed in the associations of care workers in the Argentina case. These associations were perceived as places of personal growth and professionalization that, in turn, allowed women to redefine the way they perceived their own work and subsequently enhanced their self-esteem. In the case of producers’ associations in Batallas (Bolivia), SSE initiatives promoted specialization and collective sale, centralized production, and improved quality of agricultural and dairy products. These practices have the potential to increase women’s access to markets and income, thus contributing to the revalorization of their production and generating conditions that increase their self-esteem and, ultimately, their autonomy and rights.

The case study in Vale do Ribeira (Brazil), which centred on a network of women practicing agroecology, showed how SSE practices can contribute to revalorizing both monetary and non-monetary production. In this case, the collective organization of the women farmers together with the NGO supporting their network enabled them to set up a direct marketing network with responsible consumers, relying on the creation of trust and solidarity relations. Agroecology booklets were used to raise awareness of the approach and to record the quantity and monetary equivalent of consumed, sold, bartered and donated production, strengthening the

women’s position vis-a-vis the state and their partners, and increasing the recognition of the value of their work. These processes, and the women’s collective organization to address obstacles they faced in terms of water and land management vis-a-vis the community and the state authorities, contributed to their autonomy and increased their politicization, and their bargaining power as result.



Going to a meeting of an SSE group in Quilombo Terra Seca, Brazil. Photo: Ch. Verschuur

Challenges to the revalorization of social reproduction

The revalorization of social reproduction is a process marked with tensions and contradictions. A feminist analysis of SSE practices, as carried out in the project, sheds light on the constant struggle with the state, the capitalist market economy and patriarchal norms and practices.

In the Bolivian case study, for instance, issues related to the family or social reproduction remain outside the scope of associations with both men and women members. These tended to maintain a masculine discourse focused on the primary objective of increasing the value of production. In the case of community-based care associations in Argentina, care work remains feminized with a strong maternal approach, as most of those involved are women. Thus while, on one hand, the associations may contribute to the recognition of care work, they nevertheless trap women within a gendered role of care and motherhood where any increase of personal autonomy is rooted in gender-stereotyped tasks. In the case of the Udupi fisherwomen in Karnataka, while the association challenges the state and the free-market orientation, it does not challenge the underlying capitalist structure or patriarchal norms. Rather, it provides protection within the capitalist system, which, when combined with patriarchy, confines women to subsistence livelihoods while men’s labour is better valued and considered worthy of being invested in.

Such tensions and contradictions with the capitalist market economy may also find their way into the associations’ own structures and practices. Entrenched hierarchies and

frustrations, for example, show up between women's personal objective of accumulation and the collective solidarity objective of redistribution. Within the dominant framework of the market, in which selling more generates higher incomes, solidarity associations are fragile and fraught with tensions. Moreover, women's predominance in solidarity economy practices often serves to enforce their role in collective activities, thus resulting in the paradox of associations that are meant to liberate women, actually entrenching them in voluntary or low-income work.

Limited state support can also hinder the development of SSE practices. This has been seen in all the cases studied. Conversely, state support characterized by gendered policies and programmes can reaffirm and reinforce the hierarchies embedded in capitalist societies, thus trapping women in gendered roles and limiting their emancipation. This raises the question of autonomy, but more so of the sustainability of SSE initiatives.

In the case of Vale do Ribeira, SSE groups depend to some extent on feminist NGOs that support their formation and development. Cuts in government funding to NGOs put the entire SSE project under pressure and force the search for new sources of funding. This raises the challenge of sustainability. The success of solidarity as an emancipation strategy depends on the ability to balance internal and external equity. In the case study, this means extending the network to new responsible consumers, creating new consumption groups, and building relations of trust and solidarity in which consumers take account of the needs of sustainable agriculture and the women's associations guarantee quality food at affordable prices to the urban working class. This process may in turn limit the dependence of women's associations on the state and contribute to expanding their number and networks. Nevertheless, while increasing the number of women's associations in a locality may contribute to strengthening women's political organization and autonomy, it may also put pressure on sales—creating competition that may challenge the value of solidarity. Open deliberation and discussion of these challenges within the women's associations are part of the process of fostering change in relations of production and reproduction.

The continuity of the SSE practices and women's associations studied is also conditioned by their capacity of being active in the territorial management in the communities where they are present. This is illustrated in the case of Vale do Ribeira where it encompasses, for example, reclaiming traditional knowledge, finding more diversified ways of trading their products, and including more and younger women. These SSE initiatives seek to create or reinforce reciprocity and strengthen a sense of community in rural districts characterized both by vulnerability in relation to big landowners and by patriarchal norms. The challenge is to connect women farmers' groups in the process of building a political subject capable of redefining the territory through management practices, agroforestry, agroecology, and also capable of engendering social relations which have as a horizon the sustainability of life.

Recommendations

- There is a need for public recognition of the value of women's work in SSE (and beyond) and there is a need to ensure decent work conditions for women active in SSE.
- Public policies in general and those related to SSE in particular should incorporate a gender perspective.
- Further research should examine conditions for ensuring SSE sustainability beyond state support; and how to address challenges to the revalorization of women's work.

Box 2: Project Team

Coordination

Coordinator: Christine Verschuur; Co-coordinator: Filipe Calvão; Research assistants: Yira Lazala, Laís Meneguello Bressan (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies / IHEID)

Country Research Teams

Argentina: Marisa Fournier and Erika Loritz (Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento / UNGS)

Bolivia: Ivonne Farah, Gabriela Ruesgas and Fernanda Sostres (CIDES, Universidad Mayor San Andrés); Isabelle Hillenkamp (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA)

Brazil: Miriam Nobre (Sempre Viva Organização Feminista / SOF); Isabelle Hillenkamp (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA)

India (Kerala): Rajib Nandi (Institute of Social Studies Trust) with inputs from Sheena Basheer and Sonia George

India (Tamil Nadu): Isabelle Guérin (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA); Govindan Venkatasubramanian and Santosh Kumar (Institut Français de Pondichéry)

India (Karnataka): Kaveri Haritas (O.P. Jindal Global University)

Partners

Kalpna Karunakaran (Indian Institute of Technology Madras); Jean-Louis Laville (Centre National des Arts et Métiers / CNAM); Ibrahim Saïd (UNRISD)



Mid-term workshop. Research team with members of the network of SSE initiatives in Quilombo Ribeirão Grande, Brazil. Photo: Yira Lazala

Solidarity Practices and the Formation of Political Subjects and Actions for Change

How do solidarity-based associations and initiatives emerge? How do their members constitute themselves as political subjects, and how are their collective actions produced? What are the possibilities for structural change in the way power is organized, and what challenges stand in the way of this process?

How do solidarity-based associations and initiatives emerge?

Solidarities do not form in a vacuum. The feminist analysis of social and solidarity economy (SSE) practices in the six cases studied in this project (see box) identified a number of interlinked factors and processes that contributed to the formation of solidarities among women, and to the formation of solidarity-based women's associations.



Domestic workers attending a meeting organized in connection with National Domestic Workers Day in Trivandrum, India. Photo: SEWA Kerala

Feminist construction of territory

The “crisis of social reproduction” embedded in capitalist societies and the conditions it produces have contributed to the rise of precarity. Social reproduction is a multi-level concept that involves the reproduction of social relations and institutions, the reproduction of the labour force, and the reproduction of human beings. Capitalism’s insatiable thirst for profit generation and accumulation tends to disturb the organization of social reproduction upon which its own survival rests. These contradictions, which characterize the crisis of social reproduction, contribute to poverty, inequalities and social tensions. In response, locally embedded solidarity associations have sprung up in many localities aspiring first and foremost to meet needs that neither the state nor the market are adequately providing for, and secondly, to protect the rights and livelihoods of their members and the population. In this sense, the crisis of social reproduction creates the conditions conducive for the emergence of solidarity-based associations. This alone however is not sufficient to explain how solidarity associations, and in particular their objectives, emerge.

A feminist analysis of the solidarity associations in the case studies identifies the “construction of territory”, and in particular the “feminist construction of territory”, as an important process

that may facilitate the formation of both solidarity movements and their actions for change on issues related to social reproduction and gender inequalities. The “construction of territory” is a form of collective identity built in opposition or in reaction to imposed power. In the cases studied, feminist construction of territory is a process of construction of common causes and collective identities facilitated by the existence of strong feminist movements at the national and local level. Within these processes, and in

Box 1: Project Overview: Feminist Analysis of Social and Solidarity Economy Practices: Views from Latin America and India

Social and solidarity economy (SSE) has a potentially important role to play in reorienting economies and societies toward more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. But it can only be truly transformative if it also addresses the reorganization of social reproduction, integrating the political goals of gender equality and more equitable power relations. Are SSE practices moving in the right direction?

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the India cases in particular, using intersectionality to build alliances across gender, caste, class and religion was found to be instrumental. It broadened solidarities, conferred legitimacy and subsequently helped advance solidarity associations' objectives.

The construction of common causes and collective identities

The research found that three factors in particular ultimately facilitated the formation of solidarity-based associations and their action-oriented activities: (i) women's collective recognition of their oppressed condition; (ii) their collective experience of this condition; and (iii) their awakening to the possibility for change, as exemplified in their ability to construct common causes and collective identities out of individual subjective experiences. The strength and purpose of solidarity associations may be determined by the capacity of women to achieve this level of collective consciousness.

In the cases studied, different forms of solidarity were found among women. For instance, women organized to (i) solve problems related to the provision of care for their children and the children of others; (ii) escape violent situations; (iii) safeguard their livelihoods and sustain their families; and (iv) help others find a way out of a crisis or an oppressive situation. In the Argentina case study for instance, community-based care associations emerged via a collective logic at grassroots level. Solidarity here takes the form of activism in which personal needs are put aside to find solutions for problems experienced by the women and faced by the community in general. This case study demonstrates that solidarity among women is a multilevel process that cannot be taken for granted. Solidarity can exist when common problems are recognized, shared, experienced and ultimately acted upon.

The Brazil case study found that women's participation is based on recognition of their condition as a woman, as an agricultural or craft producer, and as a citizen. Similar processes were identified in Karnataka (India); Udupi fisherwomen came together when threatened by supermarkets and large fish shops, recognizing their shared life conditions as discriminated lower caste women fish vendors, often as heads of household and responsible for feeding their families.

In addition to these factors, concrete results are also instrumental in sustaining the women's associations and solidarity practices studied. In the Tamil Nadu (India) case study for instance, solidarity emerged gradually as women identified common challenges, but initial successes in fighting illegal alcohol production also served to cement the bonds between women. Equally, in the Brazil case study, achieving concrete results to solve specific problems facing each of the women's groups was a prerequisite for the development of solidarity.

Strong feminist movements, NGOs and trade unions

The research results show that strong feminist movements may, under certain conditions, play an important role in shaping the political subjectivities that direct women's collective gaze towards gender inequalities and social reproduction issues. This is an important element in the feminist construction of territory. It may raise women's consciousness of their oppressed condition and increase their politicization. It subsequently may help reconstruct social relations and, most importantly, women's perception of the different forms of power in the territory, contributing as a result to the construction of a common cause and collective identity.

In both the Brazil and Argentina case studies, a strong connection with feminist movements was a key factor in the orientation of solidarity practices towards issues of care and social reproduction. In Argentina for instance, feminist and women's movements progressively introduced a gender perspective into childcare organizations; while in Brazil, they brought the gender agenda to the agroecology movement. In Brazil, feminist NGOs in the field of gender and agroecology also fostered the creation of women's groups, focusing on collective activities which play an important role in widening the processes of subjectivation and political struggle pursued by feminist alliances at the national and local levels.

Similar processes took place in Tamil Nadu, where an NGO facilitated the formation of solidarity groups and acted as a mediator with the state and other powerful actors, including private capital. In India in general, feminist alliances played an important role in putting the emphasis on issues affecting working women, creating a forum as well as a rhetoric of women's work as an arena of resistance and emancipation. While these processes raise women's political and social awareness and their capacity to act, they often involve tensions, contentions and contradictions.

The role of the state in the emergence of solidarity based associations

The research results show that the emergence of solidarity-based associations is facilitated when there is a supportive public policy environment for such social and solidarity initiatives. This



Dona Izaira, Quilombola peasant leader in Ribeirão Grande. Photo: Ch. Verschuur



Sempreviva Organização Feminista holds a workshop with members of women's agroecology association, Vale do Ribeira, Brazil. Photo: Ch. Verschuur

relationship is not a simple one. The state plays an important role in the development of solidarity-based associations, and yet they are in constant tension with the state.

For example, in Argentina the community-based care organizations studied could not function without the few resources they receive from the state. In Brazil, public tender processes issued by the state play an important role in supporting SSE agricultural initiatives, with the help of NGOs acting as mediators. The technical assistance and rural extension agroecology policy in the Brazil case, for instance, was built in a dialogue with the rural women's movement, feminist organizations and agroecology NGOs. Yet this policy, like many others, underwent a radical shift after the change in government in 2016 and is no longer being implemented by public bodies, private companies or NGOs. Cutbacks on social spending and shrinking of the space for policy co-construction negatively impact the sustainability of these initiatives.

In Bolivia there are similar tensions. For instance, while the importance of associativity and solidarity is embedded in the Constitution and in legislation, the legal framework often does not translate into concrete actions and policies. In Argentina, where the status of care workers is not officially recognized, the care cooperatives studied are fragile. Lack of decent work pushed some care workers, many of whom are highly qualified and leaders within the associations, to pursue better conditions in the public sector. While this has weakened the associations, the incorporation of former members of solidarity associations into the state may expand state support for care associations.

In Kerala (India), in addition to the grassroots SEWA movement, there is also some state-led support for solidarity-based practices in the form of the Women Component Plan (WCP), which organizes women into self-help groups under a state-wide programme called Kudumbashree. While personal economic aspirations to get "better" jobs have increased under this

programme, the research could not find evidence of more radical change in society. Feminists have criticized Kudumbashree for its lack of transformative potential, citing its incapacity to alter the gendered power relations underlying gender injustice.

Finally, in Karnataka (India) the Udupi fisherwomen's relationship with the state is also marked with contradictions. While the state recognizes their right to a livelihood, it still relegates women's work to the reproductive domain as mothers feeding their families, refusing to recognize them as workers on a par with fishermen. Indeed, lack of recognition of women's work and women as workers was common issue across the different case studies.

How do members constitute themselves as political subjects, and how are collective actions produced, within solidarity-based associations?

The process of deliberation

Democratic and participatory governance based on discussion and deliberation are important in solidarity-based practices and a means by which women may, under certain conditions, become active political subjects. Deliberation is a process that may shape the political agenda of the solidarity associations and subsequently empower marginalized women and drive actions for change. Within this process, collective identities and common cause are shaped and strengthened, enhancing the politicization of marginalized women.

Genuine deliberation is a horizontal process characterized by democratic participation and discussion. It can take the form of periodic assemblies, or regular formal or informal meetings, where members exchange experiences, information and knowledge. It is a self-management process in which decisions are usually made collectively and democratically, often by consensus. Meetings may be planned around topics that each participant suggests.

The process of deliberation is crucial for determining the ways in which solidarity initiatives are organized and subsequently govern themselves. This process is reflected in the management structures of the associations studied, which in many cases are inspired by egalitarian and non-hierarchical models.

Even in those cases where there were hierarchies and defined leadership structures (for example, Karnataka and Kerala), however, through the process of deliberation women learned to organize themselves, work together and engage with other, more powerful actors. In Karnataka for instance, despite hierarchies in the structure of the association, the process of everyday deliberation carried out by the women helped keep the power of the head of the association and other designated positions in check. This was possible because spaces of deliberation extended beyond the formal space of association meetings to spaces in the market in which everyday exchanges enabled women to share information, discuss and often critically engage with the running of the association.

In this sense, democratic deliberation and discussion help to “operationalize” the collective’s solidarity activities towards specific goals or collective action for change. They can be considered a form of internal governance that shapes the “political agenda” of these women. This type of management and decision-making process generates a sense of community, in which ideas of belonging and collective identities are well rooted. As a result, in some cases women managed to challenge the state, influence policies and subsequently safeguard their rights and livelihoods as well as those of their communities.

The construction of collective action for change

The research found that the issues considered suitable topics for collective action were largely determined by whether an issue was considered a private matter or a public one. Consequently, perceptions of what is private and what is public have far-reaching implications for women and for how gender shapes women’s activities, subjectivities and actions. This process is related to the construction of a common cause and collective identity. For example, in the case study of community-based care associations in Argentina, care and social reproduction were formulated as public issues that affect all, and in particular marginalized, women and therefore require collective action. As well as fostering the collectivization of care and the emergence of solidarity-based associations, this framing as a public issue also forged women’s political activism and galvanized action on the issue. However, this was not the case in all the cases studied.

In Bolivia for instance, social reproduction is considered to be located in the private domain. As a result, criticism of the inadequate quality of education, health and care systems is voiced only at an individual level, triggering individual solutions rather than collective claiming of rights. Similarly, while women members of producer associations empathize with women’s challenges related to child care and domestic violence, these problems are not formulated as public issues that affect all women and that require public (associative) action. Domestic violence or child care are rather understood as generic issues that affect women at some point in their lives, thus implicitly

accepting the gender inequalities and gender-based oppression inherent within society. On a general level, women’s and feminist organizations did question this separation, but their voices were only heard at certain political junctures.

In the case of the Udupi fisherwomen’s association in Karnataka (India), the research identified more of a mixed approach towards what was considered private sphere and what was perceived as a public issue requiring collective action. For instance, livelihood and social security are priority issues that the fisherwomen’s association advocates for in the public domain. Childcare, however, is not discussed. Women rather rely on other women (relatives or neighbours) for support, a common practice that is not challenged in the public sphere. Similarly, domestic violence may be discussed and addressed by the association, but it does not move beyond specific references to individual cases. In other words, similar to the Bolivian case, domestic violence is seen as impacting women’s lives but not as an issue that is inherently tied to the female condition and thus one that requires collective action for change. Instead, the association relies on traditional modes of resolution (mobilizing the help of two men who support the association to speak with the male perpetrator). This nevertheless reinforces gender norms that prohibit women from discussing issues of domestic violence with men.

What are the possibilities for structural change in the way power is organized, and what challenges stand in the way of this process?

The research found that some spaces of contestation over the dominant social and power relations are opening up. However, change is slow and fragile. Two main challenges were found in the case studies: (i) the state; and (ii) regimes of capital accumulation and patriarchy.

The state

One of the primary activities undertaken by the solidarity-based associations studied in the project is negotiation with the state for more rights, whether it is for more resources (Argentina; Brazil), recognition (Argentina; Brazil; Kerala) or protection of livelihoods (Brazil; Tamil Nadu; Karnataka). In most cases, these



Women demonstrating for fair trade in La Paz, Bolivia. Photo: Isabelle Hillenkamp

associations have indeed managed to challenge the state in one way or another. However, their achievements seem fragile for the time being. In Argentina and Brazil, change in government led to the suspension of support and the reversal and revocation of many supportive policies and measures. In Tamil Nadu, while women's mobilization against sand quarries that threaten their livelihoods led to changes in state policies and the adoption of new regulations, they have not been enforced properly, meaning limited change on the ground. In Karnataka, despite successful lobbying for a guarantee from the state governor that no new fish markets would be opened, the situation nevertheless looks as fragile as ever, with women acknowledging that it is only a matter of time before they lose their livelihoods.

In Bolivia, limited political will, and in some cases lack of state capacity to convert the legal framework into concrete actions, are obstacles to further progress. In addition, policy incoherence demonstrated in the state's tendency to prioritize the so-called strategic sector of the economy, such as hydrocarbon extraction and mining, to the detriment of associative initiatives have weakened agricultural and livestock production. Furthermore, producers' associations have difficulty making their voices heard in local debates, since the state favours other actors—most notably peasant unions and neighbourhood councils. All this has encouraged a fragmentation of actors in the solidarity-based associations at the national level. This fragmentation limits the possibilities for dialogue with the state and the possibilities of politicization as a result. In this context, solidarity-based associations' political agenda tends to be subordinated to the political agenda of the peasant unions that occupy a position of strength with the government, even though the local function of peasant unions is socio-political and not socio-economic.

Regimes of capital accumulation and patriarchy

Feminist analysis finds solidarity-based practices and associations in continuous tension with patriarchy and capitalism. This constitutes a major challenge for them, in terms of their sustainability and capacity to achieve structural change. In the Bolivian case study for instance, the association maintains a masculine discourse with limited attention to issues of social reproduction. In Karnataka, although the Udupi fisherwomen's association has had a positive impact on women's livelihoods, there hasn't been a change in responsibilities for social reproduction. In contrast, the association in fact adopts and uses patriarchal discourse strategically to support its cause, thus to some extent reaffirming gender norms. In addition, while the association challenges the state and the free market, it nevertheless does not challenge the underlying structures or patriarchal norms. Rather, the association advocates in a limited way for certain protections, focusing on welfare benefits available within the capitalist system. In this sense it confines women to subsistence livelihoods rather than catalysing transformative change. In addition, working as it does within the dominant framework of the market means that accumulative practices seep into the association, which then creates competition among fish sellers. This highlights the fragility of solidarity within such a framework. In this sense, reframing these struggles towards a de-colonial anti-patriarchal anti-capitalist movement is crucial to progress towards structural change.

Similar processes were also observed in the Brazil case study. As the solidarity-based association of women farmers grew, so did the competition, as well as the need to identify alternative markets, highlighting the multiple challenges facing these groups. In addition, as women's political awareness grew, they were perceived as encroaching on so-called male prerogatives, such as land and natural resource management. This created conflicts between the women and other associations, particularly those managed by men, even resulting in pressure being exerted on the women's group and on municipal institutions by the other associations to try to recover these so-called prerogatives. Given the patriarchal context in which these women live and work, combined with high levels of violence and crime, these pressures cause anxiety and uncertainty among women. As a result, many of the women were in favour of reducing their responsibilities and modes of operation. In this sense the possibilities of widening the processes of subjectivation and political struggle depend on the capacity of local actors and intermediaries to adjust their vision of change to locally diverse conditions and demands, combining the dimensions of economic autonomy, socio-political recognition and self-organization.

Recommendations

- Examine the conditions for increasing the engagement of civil society organizations and critical feminist movements with the solidarity based associations to build momentum towards more transformative outcomes.
- Examine the conditions to expand spaces of dialogue between civil society and the state in order to expand the agendas of gender equality and sustainable development.
- Examine the possibilities and challenges for the uptake of feminist approaches to the organization of social reproduction in SSE initiatives.

Box 2: Project Team

Coordination

Coordinator: Christine Verschuur; Co-coordinator: Filipe Calvão;
Research assistants: Yira Lazala, Laïs Meneguello Bressan (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies / IHEID)

Country Research Teams

Argentina: Marisa Fournier and Erika Loritz (Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento / UNGS)

Bolivia: Ivonne Farah, Gabriela Ruesgas and Fernanda Sostres (CIDES, Universidad Mayor San André); Isabelle Hillenkamp (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA)

Brazil: Miriam Nobre (Sempre Viva Organização Feminista / SOF); Isabelle Hillenkamp (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA)

India (Kerala): Rajib Nandi (Institute of Social Studies Trust) with inputs from Sheena Basheer and Sonia George

India (Tamil Nadu): Isabelle Guérin (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA); Govindan Venkatasubramanian and Santosh Kumar (Institut Français de Pondichéry)

India (Karnataka): Kaveri Haritas (O.P. Jindal Global University)

Partners

Kalpana Karunakaran (Indian Institute of Technology Madras); Jean-Louis Laville (Centre National des Arts et Métiers / CNAM); Ibrahim Saïd (UNRISD)

Making Public Policies for SSE Sustainable, Feminist-Conscious and Transformative: Exploring the Challenges

The feminist analysis of social and solidarity economy (SSE) practices in the six cases studied in the project (see box) identified a number of limitations that may undermine the existence, scope, effectiveness and sustainability of public policies for SSE. These related to (i) the ability of SSE initiatives to construct public actions (and exert pressure) for change; (ii) a disabling political environment and lack of political commitment; (iii) the nature of institutional support in place; (iv) the processes underlying SSE policy making and legislation; and (v) institutional, political and financial capacity of state institutions to act, and policy incoherence. The research findings point in particular to the problematic way in which states fulfil their responsibilities in the field of social reproduction as a structural limitation for the development of SSE initiatives. This constitutes a major impediment to the development of feminist and transformative public policies for SSE. Overcoming it will require action from governments, SSE organizations and civil society movements.

The ability of SSE organizations to construct public actions for change

The research found that SSE organizations are in constant struggle with the state. Most of the SSE initiatives studied (Argentina, Brazil, Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu) spend a considerable amount of their time and effort lobbying and pressuring governments to fulfil their obligation to protect the rights and livelihoods of their populations. This process is carried out through intermediaries, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or trade unions (Tamil Nadu; Brazil; Kerala); through direct negotiations (Argentina; Karnataka); or through street protests and other forms of direct action (Argentina; Brazil; Tamil Nadu; Karnataka). Under certain conditions, SSE organizations may play an important role in challenging the state and in shaping the public policy agenda. SSE initiatives may succeed in some cases, and they may fail in others.

While the success or failure of SSE efforts depends on multiple factors beyond the scope of this Brief to discuss, the capacity of SSE organizations to act in the first place and the nature of demands brought forward to the state are rather the product of a politicization process within SSE organizations. This process is exemplified in the capacity of members of SSE organizations to construct collective political awareness regarding unmet needs, unfulfilled rights or injustices that affect them or the wider community. The feminist analysis undertaken in the research found that the capacity of women from marginalized communities to construct a common cause and a collective identity out of their individual subjective experiences of oppression may facilitate the formation of political subjectivities and shape the women's action-oriented activities. The role of feminist movements within this process was found to be crucial, particularly in directing the gaze towards gender injustices and formulating actions for change accordingly.

Box 1: Project Overview: Feminist Analysis of Social and Solidarity Economy Practices: Views from Latin America and India

Social and solidarity economy (SSE) has a potentially important role to play in reorienting economies and societies toward more equitable, inclusive and sustainable development. But it can only be truly transformative if it also addresses the reorganization of social reproduction, integrating the political goals of gender equality and more equitable power relations. Are SSE practices moving in the right direction?

Even though women play a major role in SSE activities, until very recently the interest of both academics and policy makers in SSE has lacked a gender perspective. Feminist research on unpaid care and domestic work is only beginning to inform policy making and implementation on the ground, and SSE activities that relate to social reproduction (that is, by which society reproduces itself) are often under-recognized. The different social relationships and gender hierarchies at work in SSE typically lack a feminist analysis.

This research project aimed to contribute empirical evidence and analytical insights to begin filling these gaps in SSE research and policies from a feminist perspective.

India case studies

- Karnataka: Udupi fisherwomen association
- Kerala: SEWA domestic workers association
- Tamil Nadu: Women's organizations against sand quarries in Kancheepuram District, Palar Valley

Latin America case studies

- Argentina: Community organizations providing care services in suburbs of Buenos Aires
- Bolivia: Producer associations in Batallas, Department of La Paz
- Brazil: Agroecological and feminist collective production groups in Vale do Ribeira, State of São Paulo

The project was funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS). Find more information about the [project here](#).



The research found that a weak politicization process and limited involvement of feminist and civil society movements with SSE may limit the capacity of SSE organizations to act and restrict the scope of their demands. Crucially, these limitations may restrict their prospects for potentially shaping public policy agendas and influencing government commitment to SSE. This process may indeed explain the differences identified in the nature of the claims put forward by SSE organizations, and to some extent, the nature of some public policies put in place, particularly those with a gender perspective and those without one.

Increased and collective political awareness among members of SSE organizations, engagement of feminist and other civil society movements with SSE, and a commitment of SSE organizations to feminism were found to be critical elements for shaping public policy agendas and promoting feminist-conscious public policy.

Political environment and political commitment

The government's political commitment to alternative development based on associative participatory governance is a key determinant of whether SSE policies, legislation and other forms of support exist, or not, in a given context. The research found that a change in the political leaning of the government in power, particularly where SSE is not fully institutionalized, may impede any progress made in terms of support or even reverse it. In Argentina, Brazil and Bolivia for instance, left-leaning governments promoted SSE through multiple means over many years. Various political processes—elections in Argentina (2015); impeachment of the president in Brazil (2016)—have negatively impacted state support for SSE in both countries. Many of the public policies introduced during the period of so-called progressive government have been halted or scaled down by the new, right-leaning governments. This has had severe implications for the women's associations studied, their women members, and the NGOs that support them, due to their dependence on the state for support and financing.

The unfolding political changes in Argentina and Brazil raise questions about the sustainability of public policy and institutional support for SSE. What strategies are needed to ensure that governments do not easily reverse “progressive” social and political reforms made by their predecessors? They also raise questions about the sustainability of SSE organizations themselves. What actions are required to achieve greater autonomy and limit dependence on the state? Moreover, there is the complex issue of how to mitigate the trade-offs between institutionalization of SSE on the one hand, autonomy, and dependence on the other. The often contradictory and contentious nature of institutional support for SSE may undermine SSE's objectives, capacity, values, ethics and ability to realize its potential. Overall, SSE and the state interact within an unequal field of power relations characterized by patriarchal, capitalist and sometimes clientelistic logic. This interaction may create relationships of dependency—with or without autonomy—or may lead to co-optation and instrumentalization of SSE initiatives and organizations.

Such inherent tensions explain both SSE public policies' limited—and at times negative—impacts, as well as SSE actors' cautious attitude towards SSE institutionalization processes. Examining the possibilities available to support SSE and facilitate its expansion without compromising its values and *raison d'être* is crucial. The role of SSE organizations and entities, civil society organizations, and progressive feminist and other social movements in addressing these issues is essential. It is also incumbent upon these actors to apply pressure on governments to address claims in the field of social reproduction; promote an enabling political environment for the expression and articulation of networks of SSE initiatives; and work in collaboration with SSE organizations to reduce their dependence on the state and facilitate their collective organization, as a network and a movement, in autonomous and transformative ways.

The nature of legal recognition and institutional support

While crucial, government commitment doesn't guarantee the effectiveness or the sustainability of public policies for SSE. Legal recognition and the existence of public policies and other support mechanisms, as vital as they may be, are not sufficient to promote and enable SSE and its development. The research found that the nature of legal recognition and institutional support is a key determinant of the reach of public policies, their transformative nature, and the extent to which they enable SSE practices to valorize women's work.

In Argentina, for instance, social economy based sectoral social policy aims at incorporating unemployed and poor segments of the population into the labour market while simultaneously fostering social cohesion. While acknowledging its importance, however, the feminist analysis carried out in the research found this to be another capitalist model for development rather than an alternative approach aiming to instate a new economic model. This



Meeting during fieldwork with women members of the NGO GUIDE in Tamil Nadu. Photo: Santhosh Kumar

take on SSE can also be observed in India. While the term SSE or social economy (SE) is not used, federal and state governments' efforts to incorporate the unemployed into labour markets through associations, self-help groups and cooperatives reflect a similar rationale. In Brazil, solidarity economy policies have been the subject of semantic disputes: if for some, SSE represents an alternative model of work organization based on self-management, for others, policies in support of the sector are the equivalent of social assistance for those excluded from the labour market. In this context, the case study of agroecology and feminist collective production groups in Vale do Ribeira proposes a vision that goes beyond the linear logic of capitalist production and accumulation, and is based instead on an alternative understanding of the economy that encompasses the reproduction of all that is necessary for life. It takes the production and consumption of food as a starting point, and aims at democratization of all the power relations involved in this reproduction. The role of feminist organizations and rural women's movements in the co-construction of public policies and their implementation is central to the development of this approach.

In some countries, SSE public policies and legal recognition are narrowly conceived, with SSE limited to social enterprises and support focusing primarily on financial sustainability and entrepreneurial management. Such characteristics do not necessarily apply to SSE initiatives that aim to transform social relations from a feminist perspective. This narrow conception also tends to be characterized by a "productive bias" that places reproductive activities in a secondary position to activities that centre on job creation. In Argentina for instance, the most important policies for the urban SSE sector focus mainly on microcredit and subsidies for the promotion of small businesses. *Ellas Hacen*, introduced in 2013 by the government of Argentina as a means to integrate women from marginalized communities into the labour market by facilitating the establishment of women's cooperatives and providing training, is one example. But this programme, and many others, tend to exclude community-based care services. However, through public pressure and negotiation, some community-based care organizations managed to gain inclusion of some of their members in the programme and receive its support. This highlights how important it is for SSE entities to gain political awareness in order to claim rights and influence the public policy agenda.

The limited attention in public policies to social reproduction issues reflects the deeply rooted structural bias inherent in capitalist societies that views women's work as a service to the community rather than labour. Indeed, feminist analysis shows that public policies are often paternalistic and informed by a gendered worldview. As such, they reaffirm the hierarchies in the organization of productive and reproductive activities that characterize capitalist societies and sustain existing gender norms. In Brazil, for instance, the value of motherhood occupies a central place in the cash transfer programme *Bolsa Familia*. In Bolivia, rural women do not consider themselves workers, despite



Fisherwomen in Udupi. Photo: Kaveri Haritas

the many domestic, agricultural and petty trade tasks that they carry out, and, as a result, they do not claim rights to public services or advocate for policy change. Moreover, public policies aiming to integrate women into the labour market while fostering entrepreneurship offer training in traditionally "female" activities such as fashion and cooking, while ignoring agriculture. These programmes, while important, may trap women within predefined roles and expectations and may limit their emancipation. Similar processes were observed in Tamil Nadu, for example, where policies and projects promoting self-help groups tend to confine women beneficiaries to "domestic ghettos" like embroidery or small livestock rearing.

Such public policies foster a reality where women's work is valued less than men's labour. In Kerala, domestic work performed by women is seen as an extension of housework that a housewife performs in her own home. As such it is undervalued, poorly remunerated compared to domestic work performed by men, and poorly regulated. Gender bias in policies can also be found in relation to fishing communities in some Indian states, which provide cash and in-kind compensation during the monsoon season when fishing is banned. Family units headed by fishermen receive such compensation, whereas fisherwomen are not considered to be heads of household and may therefore be excluded from benefits.

Processes underlying legislation and policy making

Co-construction of public policies is an important process that opens up dialogue between SSE, its allies and governments, and allows for SSE voices to be heard and represented. It also allows SSE actors to assess the political and institutional capacity of state institutions to address



Discussions and deliberations among women about women's engagement and how to attract the new generation. Changalpet, India. Photo: Santhosh Kumar

their needs effectively. Co-construction, ideally, allows for more effective SSE policy design, implementation and review. Top-down interventions, which exclude SSE actors and their allies in policy-making processes, no matter how well-intentioned they are, have downsides.

In Argentina for instance, decentralization and poor implementation of state programmes has increased the role of civil society organizations in the implementation of public policies (service provision in particular). While there are no formal processes of policy co-construction, public and political pressure applied by the community organizations of care workers studied in the research, with their allies in social and feminist movements, have influenced change in public policies. For example, when the government of the province of Buenos Aires first introduced the *Programa Unidades de Desarrollo Infantil* to support the development of childcare centres, no funding was allocated for the care workers themselves. Public mobilization and political pressure by community care workers and their allies eventually caused the provincial government to redirect some of the funds to the workers.

In Brazil there have been some moments of policy co-construction, particularly when the Worker's Party was in power (2003–2016). During this period rural movements and NGOs benefited from unprecedented spaces of participation in the definition and management of agricultural development policies, such as public procurement of produce from family farms, rural credit, technical assistance schemes, and agroecology. A new Directorate of Rural Women Policies at the Ministry of Agrarian Development was established, staffed and funded. National and regional meetings were organized in which national agroecology, technical assistance and rural extension policies were defined. Within these spaces issues of gender equality were discussed and

incorporated into the new policies. These policies further allowed executing entities, including NGOs, to develop their own proposals and programmes in the territories in which they operate. While these were important steps, the policies nevertheless remained experimental rather than universal ones, and were thus perceived as limited and bureaucratic in the eyes of some activists. Change in government since impeachment in May 2016 has severely impacted these policies. The Ministry of Agrarian Development disappeared and, although some policies and the main spaces of participation have been formally maintained, those who still participate in these processes say that their voices are not heard by the current government.

The institutional and political capacity of state institutions, and policy coherence

The capacity of state institutions to act—both in terms of translating policies and legislation into action plans and programmes, and the institutional capacity to implement them—is crucial for giving public policies meaning. In Bolivia for instance, despite the existence of a large number of laws in favor of strengthening producers' associations, concrete implementation of this normative framework lags behind. Policy implementation instead tends to favour social and political organizations (peasant unions) whose agendas do not include the economic or social demands of rural and urban producers' associations. In India, the state's acceptance of the Sustainable Development Goals and its constitutional commitment to equality and the right to life do not filter down into specific policies for fisherfolk, which recognize men as workers but not women. Thus the Udupi fisherwomen's association has to rely on local, contextual and transient agreements with lower levels of government to protect women's livelihoods, while the broader issue of equal recognition of their work is ignored.

Where programmes do exist and are implemented, resources are not always adequate for addressing the evolving needs. In Argentina for instance, in 2009 the government introduced the *Programa Ingreso Social con Trabajo: Argentina Trabaja* to facilitate labour market integration through the creation of cooperatives. While the programme is meant for people in vulnerable situations and values collective work as an important tool to improve their lives, cooperative members are paid below minimum wage and have precarious social protection. The *Programa Unidades de Desarrollo Infantil* has similar shortcomings.

Policy incoherence further impedes the effectiveness of public policies for SSE. Indeed, the state is made up of diverse, and at times conflicting, entities, with the various ministries and departments at national and local levels having different priorities. In Argentina, Brazil and India, for instance, public policies for SSE coexist with neoliberal policies that prioritize corporations and capital accumulation. This duality may have negative consequences for SSE organizations and limit the impact of public policies for SSE. In Brazil for instance, the government pursues a dual agricultural model. While family farming and agroecology have been reinforced through a range of policies, the development and advancement of this model has been limited by other policies intended to preserve the interests of big farmers and landowners. In Bolivia, the state's tendency to prioritize "strategic" sectors of the economy such as hydrocarbon extraction and mining at the expense of associative initiatives has weakened small-scale agriculture and livestock production. In India, the nexus between the state and the private sector threatens SSE initiatives. In Karnataka for example, state funds are directed towards capital-intensive enterprises

and business initiatives, such as the ownership of fishing boats, fish processing and ice factories, which generate fiscal revenues. These capital-intensive establishments are owned by men. Fisherwomen's work is considered livelihood and not business, and thus not beneficial to state revenues. Such perceptions and discursive framing obscure women's contributions: to ensuring the local distribution and sale of fresh fish, enabling access to cheap and nutritious food in the community, as well as the shadow work of cleaning fish that is sold in restaurants and exported by companies, thus contributing indirectly to state revenues through taxes and revenues generated by these enterprises.

Recommendations

- The research findings demonstrate how fragile and complex the SSE-state relationship is, in particular within a neoliberal capitalist market economy that prioritizes capital accumulation over solidarity practices and social reproduction. While the road towards a more equitable economic system and new social relations is still long, states in the meanwhile have the duty to fulfil their obligations in social reproduction. This should include support that enables SSE organizations to develop. Governments need to rethink their policies, and the governance of policy design and implementation, from a feminist perspective to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of public policies for SSE.
- The role of SSE organizations, civil society organizations and progressive feminist movements are essential in this process, both in applying pressure on governments to maintain their support, namely in the field of social reproduction, and in working in collaboration with SSE organizations to explore the possibilities to reduce their dependence on the state. In this sense the engagement of feminist and other civil society movements with SSE, and a commitment of SSE organizations to feminism, should be promoted in the quest for feminist public policy. Enabling the articulation of networks of SSE initiatives in this endeavour is a strategy that may support the development of feminist and transformative SSE.
- Further research is needed to examine how dimensions of social reproduction can be better incorporated into public policies for SSE; and strategies to ensure that governments do not easily reverse progressive social and political reforms made by their predecessors, achieve greater autonomy and limit SSE dependence on the state and ensure its sustainability, and mitigate tensions and ensure that SSE public policies are effective and sustainable.

Box 2: Project Team

Coordination

Coordinator: Christine Verschuur; Co-coordinator: Filipe Calvão;
Research assistants: Yira Lazala, Lai's Meneguello Bressan (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies / IHEID)

Country Research Teams

Argentina: Marisa Fournier and Erika Loritz (Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento / UNGS)

Bolivia: Ivonne Farah, Gabriela Ruesgas and Fernanda Sostres (CIDES, Universidad Mayor San Andrés); Isabelle Hillenkamp (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA)

Brazil: Miriam Nobre (Sempreviva Organização Feminista / SOF); Isabelle Hillenkamp (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA)

India (Kerala): Rajib Nandi (Institute of Social Studies Trust) with inputs from Sheena Basheer and Sonia George

India (Tamil Nadu): Isabelle Guérin (Institut de recherche pour le développement / IRD-CESSMA); Govindan Venkatasubramanian and Santosh Kumar (Institut Français de Pondichéry)

India (Karnataka): Kaveri Haritas (O.P. Jindal Global University)

Partners

Kalpana Karunakaran (Indian Institute of Technology Madras); Jean-Louis Laville (Centre National des Arts et Métiers / CNAM); Ibrahim Saïd (UNRISD)