

# 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?

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: Udipi 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

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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**

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