**Feminist analysis of social and solidarity economy practices:**

**views from Latin America and India[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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***Introduction***

Production, exchange and redistribution practices based on solidarity can be found in almost all areas of economic activity – from agriculture to handicraft, manufacturing, finance, social and care services. These practices privilege the quest for solidarity (among producers, between producers and consumers, in diverse territories and environments, etc.) over individual (or group) profit and rent seeking behaviour. Social and solidarity economy practices do not aim to replace the market nor the state, but rather to re-articulate the latter two institutions under the principles of reciprocity and solidarity. This is particularly the case when the logics of capital accumulation *endanger the enjoyment of social and economic rights*. Social and solidarity economy (SSE) practices (re)invent non-capitalist social relations and forms of management that allow for the re-appropriation of the means of production by workers and the re-activation of social relations that are at the antipodes of individualism and greed, opening possibilities to organize *social reproduction* in a way in which “all persons’ capabilities and the quality of all lives” matter(Coraggio 2009)*.* Finally, social and solidarity economy practices make room for debate to take place, thus articulating democracy and the economy, and bringing about new ways of contesting politics, development institutions and public policies.

Long ignored, SSE practices have received growing attention in the last decades from academics and policymakers alike (Laville and Cattani 2006). However, this growing interest remains gender-blind, even though these practices are highly gendered and women play a major role in them.

Feminist studies have deconstructed the concept of work – in particular women's work - contesting the binary distinction between "production" and "reproduction". Social reproduction encapsulates the renewal of the workforce and the reconstitution of social relationships and institutions, to maintain life and reproduce the next generation. It thus includes not only all activities but also relationships necessary to maintain life now and in the future. Care and domestic labour – for instance preparing meals, caring for the well-being, educating - are part of social reproduction, but also agricultural labour for self-consumption or community work for the maintenance of social ties and a healthy surrounding environment.

Social reproduction dynamics are embedded in SSE initiatives. However, the way in which social reproduction relations operate within SSE has not yet been extensively studied.

At the Gender Centre of the Graduate institute, we conducted a research project aimed at addressing these gaps in SSE analysisand policiesfrom a feminist perspective. We hypothesized that the social and solidarity economy cannot contribute to sustainable development and become an alternative to current economic (mal)functioning if it merely offers innovative forms of production, consumption, exchange and financing. We presumed that to be truly transformative, SSE also needs to address the reorganisation of social reproduction, integrating the political goals of gender equality and equitable gender and power relations.

In that order of ideas, the objectives of the research were the following: 1. To understand practices, social relations and power relations linked to social reproduction within SSE; 2. To explore the contribution of SSE to the renewal of public action and policies, in the field of production and social reproduction; 3. To bring insights on the on-going discussions on policy innovations, as a way of contributing to the discussion on the SDGs.

The research was conducted in six different places, Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil in Latin America, and Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu in India, with a network of researchers based in those countries. The main conclusions of this project bring new insights along four axes of analysis that we present below: 1. Work, social reproduction, social and gender relations. 2. The usefulness of the concept of solidarity; 3. Territory and the constitution of political subjects. ; 4. Articulation with the State, support, autonomy or co-optation.

## **Work, social reproduction, social and gender relations**

In the six cases studies of our research we confirmed that the frontiers between women’s productive and reproductive activities are blurred. Women’s work in SSE activities – like subsistence farming, selling fish in the market, care - is frequently considered as a service more than as work, "naturally" carried out by women by virtue of being a woman, and "productive" activities are often presented as domestic ones. As a result, a common issue in the different case studies is that, since their work is not recognized as such, women have limited or no social rights as workers, and they are often not entitled to protection or support from the State.

In all the initiatives that we studied, women led associative activities incorporating care: they care at the same time for people, for the territory, for local collective identities and for the immediate reproduction of life. These organisations fulfil functions that the State does not provide, they deliver services that are socially necessary and that are highly demanded by the local population. In their daily tasks as members of these organisations, the women provide access to rights: to food, education, recreation, minimal income, environmental sustainability, social security. Huge amounts of personal time are used by women to carry out all the reproductive activities. This adds to what can be called the *mental load* of social reproduction. Within SSE's as well as in capitalist social relations of production, women’s reproductive work is still highly unrecognized and devalued even though it is the basis for the continuity of life.

## **The usefulness and limitations of the concept of solidarity**

The case studies investigated lead us to question the usefulness of a concept such as solidarity economy to depict the concrete alternative economic practices that women's associations are undertaking at the local level. Rather than opposing "traditional solidarities", based on ascribed identities such as kinship, caste, ethnicity, gender, space, to "modern solidarities", based on voluntary commitment and free will, the analysis suggests that it makes more sense to explore the connections between various forms of solidarities, since it is precisely those connections that allow new forms of interdependence to emerge. In doing so, this analysis adopts an intersectional analysis examining the social, economic and political positions of people (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The tensions between a dominant context of profit seeking and alternative economic perspectives may fragilize SSE initiatives, either by creating internal tensions or by relegating such practices to marginal spheres of activity. In terms of the emancipatory potential of such initiatives, solidarity economy practices may result in the paradox of associations that on the one hand are meant to free women, but entrench them in poor paying work. Such poorly paid work may exist in parallel with profit seeking economies benefitting from the work of SSEs. The gaping inequalities of income and quality of life may destabilize SSE initiatives. While SSE is promoted as providing solutions towards greater sustainability (Sahakian, Dunand 2014) and an inclusive economy that provides an alternative model of development and thus an alternative globalization, empirical analysis of these initiatives must interrogate if they enable women or reinforce their marginalities. Looking closely at these practices, it becomes clear that the spaces created by SSE initiatives are often contradictory, often reflective of social and structural inequalities, while at the same time challenging them.

Solidarity, understood as the search for equality-based relations of interdependence, represents a condition for the transformation of social relations at different levels. Our case studies point to interdependence not only within SSE initiatives, but also between these initiatives and the local communities and territories in which they function. This means that the adjustment of the proposal of solidarity economy to particular local conditions in order to build concrete responses to specific demands is an indispensable condition for its acceptance and enlargement. In this way, it would be possible to not fragment the political subjects of alternative economies.

In some of the initiatives studied in this research, associativity and solidarity among women that share the same class conditions and the same territory have opened opportunities to develop concrete ways of reproduction of life that are not ruled, or not exclusively, by capitalist and patriarchal norms. However, it is important to highlight that solidarity does not mean sacrificing personal interests, it involves rather the capacity for empathy shared by people living in the same territory, belonging to the same social class, sharing concrete conditions of life and struggles. In a context dominated by hegemonic global capitalism, the question of to what extent SSE is subsidiary of the reproduction of capital or it is a systemic alternative to it, is still open.

## **Territory as the basis of the construction of a new collective political subject**

The predatory impact of global capitalism on people and environment produces a crisis of social reproduction. Regarding care for the territory, feminist studies had critically discussed the fact that the involvement of women in these activities does not derive from the fact that they have a higher "natural" propensity to protect nature, but that this is the result of a process where they have become aware that they are more directly at threat by environmental depletion or by neoliberal conservation policies (Agarwal 1997).

One of the most important bases of SSE initiatives is the territory, as a vindication, as an object of struggle, and as a source of solidarity. The notion of territory is a key dimension of SSE in a feminist perspective, that allows to articulate the disputes over resources and the construction of collective political subjectivities, showing the imbrication among people, ecosystems, and activities such as production and social reproduction, inserted in the frame of broader social systems of distribution of power in globalized economy.

Territorialization of the economy seems to be a very outstanding feature of SSE when analysed in a feminist perspective. The territorialization of economy through SSE initiatives is strongly impacted by conflicts around the construction of space. Women, as the ones who depend more directly on the resources that they can find in their territories, historically and socially considered responsible for social reproduction, have a relevant role in such struggles. The findings of this research are coherent with the statements made by Silvia Federici, suggesting that in contemporary global capitalism land is not an irrelevant means of production, but the material basis for subsistence work, therefore the basis of many women's livelihoods and also the foundation of their economic and political activities and organisations. Women’s struggles for the re-appropriation of the land, both in the rural and urban settings, is central (Federici 2004, 2011).

Such struggles have the potential of articulating new political emancipatory narratives in which the binaries nature/culture, reason/emotion, production/reproduction, that are constitutive of modernity (Escobar 2016), and their correspondent hierarchies and mechanism of domination are blurred. It is thus possible to state that the apparently fragile, small, dependent marginalized women’s SSE organisations are actually advancing towards a renewed political decolonial entanglement, rearticulating the politics of everyday life. These apparently insignificant, maybe not that radical initiatives, are indeed particularly relevant for the comprehension and transformation of our current unsustainable, violent, sexist, classist and racist social order.

## **Articulation with the State: support, autonomy or co-optation**

One of the objectives of this research was to critically analyse the role of the State in relation to women’s SSE initiatives. We observed how they responded to State projects, laws or public policies, and how existent or disappearing social policies indirectly sustained or brought obstacles to these initiatives. We observed the negative effects of the absence or disappearing State support to SSE initiatives. However, the effects of dependency vis-à-vis the State can be variable, and they differ according to the type of relations established between the SSE groups, the public institutions and their allies. In some of the case studies, there is a contradictory relation with supposedly progressive governments and policies that actually weaken women’s collective initiatives through its clientelist logics, its patriarchal rationality and its alliances with corporative interests. For example, strong mafia-like nexus between the State and private capital (Tamil Nadu) partake in the urbanization and financialization of social reproduction that contributes to the fact that women, ultimately, have lost control over their livelihood and territories. In other cases the privatization of state institutions (Udupi) results in the State being one of those competing with other private interests to occupy spheres of work that women occupy, thus threatening women’s livelihoods. On the other hand, more substantially progressive governments in Latin America (for instance in Argentina and Brazil) were recently defeated by right-wing opponents through different political processes, and these changes have had a deep negative impact on the solidity of the analysed SSE initiatives and in the possibility of emergence of new SSE initiatives. In the case of Bolivia, because of the co-optation of women’s organizations by the ruling party, they have been subject to co-optation and local representatives typically complained about being used by their federations, who summon them to mobilize in masse in demonstrations to support the government, even though they are not really interested in their needs.

In these contradictory and complex scenarios, the relationships of the analysed initiatives with the State are of permanent tension and negotiation and can vary between bubbling up in autonomy and fragility and scaling up with risks of co-optation and exploitation. Still, what is clear is that State's co-responsibility in the provision of all activities and means that are necessary for social reproduction is not being fulfilled. Claims to the State to accomplish these responsibilities should be pursued as these should not rest on families, associations, nor SSE initiatives only, without due recognition and reward.

The Brazilian case study illustrates that well. The transition to feminist agroecology in Barra do Turvo is an on-going process, which began with a resignification of agricultural production and food, and continued with new value given to women's work, some renegotiations of gender relations in different spheres (family, community, market and, to a lesser extent, the local government), as well as a new commitment of women to local political issues. This process has been based on solidarities that have been strengthened and expanded on the basis of common objectives among women's groups, whose nature and place in their neighbourhood has gradually changed. This dynamic has been based on the experimentation and the progressive affirmation of new practices and social relations which broadly aim at greater autonomy and the reproduction of life in ecologically and socially more sustainable forms. However, the process relies on small groups, on a small number of local leaders, on financial and human resources provided so far by the SOF, and it faces differences among women, which tend to hinder the construction of a broader collective action.

In the same sense, a central challenge founded on the Bolivian case study is to reorient State policies in two directions: to conceive care and social protection as a fundamental and universal socio-economic right; and to strengthen the associative and collective forms of economy in order to expand the emerging forms of common management of social reproduction. The expansion of the State’s shared responsibility for solidarity is a major priority in Bolivia, which involves reorienting the current pattern of development towards compliance with the normative advances, contained in the Constitution and a number of laws, in terms of social reproduction, without expanding co-optation of civil society organisations by the State.

The case study in Argentina also confirms that in the globalized capitalist system it is not possible for SSE experiences to be financially sustainable without the support of the State. Public funding is an important aspect for mercantile microbusiness and it is even more important for childcare organisations. The network of community centres charges minimal or no fees to families for the services they provide and depend on public funding for their daily functioning. In this case, the financial dependence was not an inhibitor factor for the ideological and political autonomy of the organisations. Through different ways~~,~~ they could maintain autonomous projects from the State. However, the lack of public funding limits the growth of the organisations and the consolidation of its political and pedagogic project. The demand for integral funding and recognition is a shared topic with other SSE experiences. But, unlike the mercantile experiences, they deliver services that are socially necessary and that are highly demanded by the local population, that the State does not provide. In their daily tasks these centres guarantee children’s access to rights (of food, education, recreation). Social policies and the legislation of SSE do not include care and gender equality in their institutional designs. The productive bias of SSE hides the associative care work and the contribution of women to the reproduction of life in the best possible conditions. This aspect limits the potential of SSE as a contra hegemonic field.

While one can observe effervescent initiatives that are bubbling up, multiplying, in autonomous and creative ways, the lack of State support and the productive bias in the conceptualization of SSE may let them be as fragile as soap bubbles. As the case studies encompassed in the research show, the pathways out of fragility may depend on an articulation of these multiple initiatives, leaving them with autonomy without being co-opted through state-led programmes. This needs political environments that allow the constitution of networks and discursive fields to sustain the confluence of dispersed initiatives, as well as the expansion of the productive bias that SSE practices have had until now.

***Right to development and renewed perspectives on SSE initiatives through a feminist approach***

Our findings show that in order to expand its transformative potential, SSE needs to introduce a feminist perspective questioning the way in which *social reproduction* is organized. The research confirmed the blurred lines between production and reproduction and the importance of making visible women’s reproductive work both within SSE initiatives and outside it. It has emphasized the urgent need of redistributing this work not only within the family, in particular with men (no solely other women and girls), but also with other institutions responsible for social reproduction, in particular the State or State-supported community-based case associations. It has also underlined the need for decent and stable incomes and workers’ rights for all, in particular marginalized women who are not in formal sectors – like SSE initiatives. These are conditions to build social justice, defend women's rights and progress towards gender equality and open up spaces of social transformation.

This research has underlined the importance of promoting an *articulation* of these multiple and often fragile initiatives, and to create political environments that allow the constitution of networks and discursive fields to sustain the confluence of dispersed initiatives. It has demonstrated the enormous political relevance of women’s SSE initiatives in the sense that they can provide the setting for the construction of new political emancipatory narratives. The SSE experiences here analyzed are searching to reconstitute non-capitalist, non-liberal and non-State forms of organisation, (Escobar 2016), combining autonomy, communality and territoriality.

The defence of the right to earn a livelihood - in good and healthy conditions - on their place of living has inspired women to organize themselves and the community. Having been socialized as partly responsible for the sustainability of live has been a driving force for their involvement in SSE practices. Consciousness is strong among marginalized communities that the *territory* is vital for their survival. SSE experiences may thus constitute spaces of resistance for the reproduction of life in the best possible conditions, spaces of defence of life in opposition to the destruction through the financialisation of nature and social relations. The research confirmed that an analysis of SSE initiatives through a gender perspective can help understand these as germinal processes that open opportunities for *new social relations*, challenging gender, social exclusion and power, despite the many nuances and contradictions that these practices entail. They are reaffirming that life is interdependency at all levels, including with nature (Escobar 2016).

The research revealed the claim for recognition of women as workers and the need of promotion of all women worker's rights. It also suggested that the fact that the State does not fulfil its responsibilities in providing social reproduction affects negatively the deployment of SSE initiatives. Claims to the State to accomplish these responsibilities for social reproduction should be pursued as these should not rest on families, associations, nor SSE initiatives only, without due recognition and reward. The research uncovered the following paradox: while it is not possible to sustain solidarity initiatives without State support, either by subsidies, by promotion and protection policies or by other social policies, at the same time they cannot exist without autonomy and refuse to be co-opted by the state without losing their *raison d'être*.

We propose to include the notion of territory in public policy and public debates regarding SSE, as a basis that allows to articulate the disputes over resources and the construction of collective political subjectivities, showing the interdependence among people, ecosystems, and activities in production and social reproduction, inserted in the frame of broader social systems of distribution of power in globalized economy. Finally, we observed the necessity to promote political environments that allow the constitution of networks and discursive fields to sustain the confluence of dispersed initiatives.

This research reintroduced the discussion and brought some contributions to the empirical and theoretical debates on *social reproduction*, which had been sidelined since long. SSE initiatives could further explore under what conditions these spaces can durably empower marginalized women and reduce the fragility of these experiences.

In communal forms of organisations that are neither capitalist, liberal or state led, unequal and intersecting *power* relations can still reinforce women's marginalities. These issues would merit further empirical work and analysis. Processes of *deliberation*, seen as processes to constitute political subjects and women as subjects of rights, would also merit further exploration. Pursuing feminist analysis of multiple solidarity economic initiatives could contribute to open up the field of what is *possible* in the current context of crisis of the dominant neo-liberal model and increasing gender, class and race inequalities.

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1. This research was coordinated by *Christine Verschuur*, Graduate Institute Geneva, with financial support of SNIS andconducted with a network of researchers: *Filipe Calvão, Ivonne Farah, Marisa Lis Fournier, Isabelle Guérin, Kaveri Haritas, Isabelle Hillenkamp, Santosh Kumar, Yira Lazala, Erika Loritz, Miriam Nobre, Rajib Nandi, Gabriela Ruesgas, Fernanda Sostres, Govindan Venkatasubramanian.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)