

Chapter 5

Horizontal and Diverse

An affirmation of equality ²⁹⁴

Writing this, I'm in a bit of a horizontal dilemma. When I make an outline of where I want to go, I keep coming up with intersecting circles, or better yet, globes. I feel like I'm standing in front of a merry-go-round, maybe a traffic roundabout, trying to figure out when/where to jump in. So here I go, where I see an affirmation of equality.

In October 2008, I was lucky enough to be invited to attend the Fifth International Conference of La Vía Campesina, who I have mentioned several times already. The meeting was held in Matola, Mozambique, a community just outside the capital city of Maputo. I went there to help record the conference by interviewing some of the delegates and to learn more about the campesin@ way of life and how that way is crystallized in a call for and a practice of food sovereignty. I will come back to the many things I learned in those interviews, but first let's go to Lichinga, the capital of Niassa province in northwest Mozambique. Lichinga is nine hundred miles north of Maputo.

I went to Lichinga, after the conference, with Julio dos Santos Pessego,²⁹⁵ the advocate director for Mozambique's National Peasants' Union (UNAC/União Nacional de Camponeses) in Niassa province. With Pessego (which means peach, and is what everyone calls him) I visited peasant associations in four differ-

ent communities. With us were Portuguese/English interpreter Edgar Basilio Ussene, UCA (Union of Associations and Cooperatives of Lichinga) leaders Alifa Aide and Xavier Jaime, who translated from Yao to Portuguese, and UCA president Carlos Afana. The first people we visited were the Ncachelenga Women's Association in Namacula, a Lichinga neighborhood.

In Namacula, groups of small homes and other buildings were separated by fences of cane. The roads were orange-yellow hardened earth. We met in a small one-room building with a swept-dirt floor. The light came in through the door and lingered on the white walls. As guests, a couple of us were honored with chairs. In a back and forth conversation in Yao, Portuguese, and English, we talked about how and why the association was founded, the crops the association grows, their accomplishments and difficulties.

The next day, we met with representatives from several associations in the small community of Meponda, a couple of hours drive away, on the shore of the ancient Lake Niassa (the fifth largest lake, by volume, in the world.²⁹⁶). We met under a tree behind the home of an association leader. Several of the people we talked to there were also members of women's associations.

As I wrote in an article²⁹⁷ about what I learned from these association members, and also from other



Meponda, on the shores of Lake Niassa, Mozambique.

associations in the Marracuene area near Maputo, there is great diversity in the crops people grow, in the foods people are producing, and in how people use the extra value they create to help their community. There is also diversity in the types of associations or cooperatives people are building.

Some associations come together as small or large groups of families. Some people unite around the need to farm near a river, others to share access to a water channel. In some, the land is divided up and worked by families, while in others, land is worked collectively. In one association, collective land was used to learn about new methods of planting, while in others there is no collective land at all. One form of association that I learned of immediately was women's associations.

When I asked the women of the Ncachelenga As-



Yoon, Geum-Soon in Matola, Mozambique.

sociation, "Why?" they said that, basically, it was an affirmation of equality by organization. This way they could ensure that they received their equal share of the money made at the market from selling the harvest. In Meponda, Filomena Aualo, president of the April 7 Women's Association, said that sometimes men don't see the advantage of working in an association, so the women form them themselves. But she said graciously, "Sometimes, the women go there and work and when they get revenue they buy trousers for the husband who was forbidding his wife to go to work in the association." In Meponda, there is even the occasional man who joins a women's association.

In Lusanyando, another community we visited near Lichinga, one man said: "A woman is also a human and they have a right to have their own group to do what they need. In this kind of association the

women are the ones who decide what to produce and the women decide what to do with their revenues without the influence of men.”

Towards the end of the conversation with the Nchachelenga Association, one of the women said: “The group is constituted of women but each woman works with her husband. The field belongs to the group, the association, but each woman cultivates their own part with their husband. Also, sometimes we have a need for a job to be done by men and each member asks her husband, ‘We would like you to help on this job.’ For example, the house for the chickens was built by the men. The women made the blocks and the men built the house.”

One thing all the associations had in common was they concluded our meetings with beautiful improvised singing.

Anyway, I bring this up first in this chapter because one of the most elemental connections between people is between two people, in particular between women and men. By default, there can be no equality in this relationship, in the language of vertical and horizontal, if it is not horizontal. Recognizing that often times in relationships men dominate women, women have affirmed their equality by working and organizing together. This was made very clear to me when I met with the women’s associations in Niassa, and, as I wrote earlier, when I spoke with Ela Bhatt and Jayshree Vyas who work with the hundreds of thousands of women making history in the Self-Employed Women’s Association in Gujarat in India. Similarly, on the scale of a national movement, I learned this from Bertha Blanco and the women’s organization *Bartolina Sisa* in Bolivia. Further, in Ma-

tola, at the *Vía Campesina* conference, it was put in the appropriate perspective by Yoon, Geum-Soon of the Korean Women Peasants Association.

The precondition

Yoon, Geum-Soon is the international coordinator of the Korean Women Peasants Association (KWPA), co-chairperson of the Korean Women’s Alliance, and a member of the International Coordinating Committee in *Vía Campesina*. In 2005, she was one of 1,000 women proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize by PeaceWomen Across the Globe.²⁹⁸ When I interviewed her in Mozambique, she said, “In *La Vía Campesina*, farmers and other people are talking about food sovereignty and I believe the precondition to realize food sovereignty is women’s rights.”²⁹⁹ And that pretty much sums it up. One, she points out the paramount significance of women’s equality and two, as I realized later, she brings together human dignity and modes of production.

Speaking specifically about food sovereignty and methods of production, she went on to say: “Women have an important role in realizing food sovereignty. Women are those who actually find seeds, collect seeds, develop seeds, and preserve them. I believe that when it comes to connecting consumers with producers, women have an important role. To preserve seeds, to preserve natural resources, women have a traditional role in protecting them.”

She continued: “Let me tell you what is going on in the Korean agricultural area. We women peasants develop our crops and process those foods. Then, we connect the women peasants with the women customers in the city, in the urban areas. We are using



(Above left) Walking on a road near Lichinga in Niassa Province, in Mozambique. (Above right) Cosma Bulu at the Vía Campesina conference in Matola, Mozambique. (Below) On the stage at the Vía Campesina Conference. The banner says (in Portuguese): Yes to food sovereignty. No to violence against women.



direct marketing.

“The other campaign we are launching is the revitalization of disappearing-traditional seeds. We collect all the seeds which are at risk of disappearing and we plant those seeds in our rural areas. We provide, distribute these seeds to other people so they can cultivate those seeds. That way we produce those foods again. We re-begin the natural cycle.”

Additionally, Yoon, Geum-Soon described the setting up of “common cafeterias” in the rural areas to feed peasants working in the fields. And she told of, “... organizing education programs for the women and for the men, in terms of sexual violence and domestic violence.”³⁰⁰

There were two primary campaigns which were promoted at the *Vía Campesina* conference, food sovereignty and the end of violence against women. The two are integrally connected. The first step in equality between men and women is an end to violence against women. With that equality, food sovereignty stands a chance.

Another half

Another woman I interviewed in Matola was Cosma Bulu. Cosma Bulu is a board member of MVIWATA, *Mtandao wa Vikundi vya Wakulima Tanzania*, which means in English, Defender of Farmer’s Interests by Farmers Themselves in Tanzania. The organization has 60,000 members throughout Tanzania. Cosma Bulu spoke about MVIWATA, about how it is a network of farmers which learns and circulates knowledge of seeds and planting. She spoke of farmers founding their own banks and making local decisions. Then, when I thought the interview was about

over, I discovered that there is another half to Cosma Bulu’s life. I discovered this serendipitously when an Indian man who had been resting in our otherwise deserted meeting-tent, offered the question, “What about the role of women?” Cosma Bulu answered succinctly, “Yes, rural women, in fact, they are producers.”

She went on: “But they can produce very little due to they have a lot of work to do and the poor technology used. The woman has to go to the field for cultivation. When she comes back with firewood on the head, a baby on the back, she has to cook, she has to care for the husband. At the same time, she has to attend the husband. When she says, ‘I am tired,’ he says, ‘Oh, you are not tired. You are only tired because of cultivating, but not for this.’ He doesn’t remember that she has used a lot of energy.

“That is why we say that women are being humiliated. They have no say for their own body and they have no say even for what they are producing. The woman is the producer but she doesn’t have any say to say that, ‘I want to sell this so that I can buy something for myself.’ The husband takes the crops and goes to sell. As a result, he doesn’t come home with the money. The money is used for drinking and giving to other women. When the woman asks, ‘What have you done with the money?’ they become aggressive, beating – big harassment to the women in Tanzania. What I have learned is that the problem of humiliation to women is not only in Tanzania or Africa but in the whole world.”³⁰¹

The man who, earlier, had asked the question said, “What you are saying, the same is in India.”

Cosma Bulu continued: “So, we say, first, for the