**Occupy Agriculture?**

**A Gendered Assessment of Local Food Systems and Participatory Democracy**

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In some ways, the suffragettes who picketed outside the White House through the winter of 1917 are a precursor to the Occupy Movement. Women demanding their rights had long made a strategy of claiming public space as women’s space, but this was the first effort by militants to shame a president by occupying *his* space. This connection between spaces of governance, marginalization, resistance, and demands for participatory inclusion clearly find their parallel in Zuccotti Park nearly a century later. As well, the marches for women’s rights as part of the food sovereignty movement around the world follow in the footsteps of those suffragettes who marched down the main streets of towns and cities in the U.S. and Britain. And the inspirations for and ideas behind the relocalizing efforts apparent in today’s American food democracy movement are not far, at least rhetorically, from the sense of powerlessness in the face of transnational corporate interests and global institutions that inspired Occupy Wall Street, nor are the young people who camped out in the park much different from those homesteaders who have migrated to American’s farm communities.

We begin with these similarities to focus on one the most fundamental questions about the U.S. food democracy and relocalization movement as it stands alongside the broader global food sovereignty and the Occupy movements. The redistribution of power advocated by the latter two as a counter to neoliberal globalization points clearly toward the institutionalization from within of participatory decision-making practices, in ways that empower those outside the decision-making structures of capitalist markets, global financial institutions, and other realms of social and political power. On the ground, this emphasis also means the direct empowerment of women to speak of their own conditions, to struggle against prevalent misogyny that disempowers women, and to participate in all aspects of governance. This is particularly important, given that women comprise about 43% of the global farm work force, indicating women’s significant contribution to food production even though an accurate accounting is impossible given significant local variation and the failure to include in economic data the portion of women’s agricultural work that is considered household or non-market (Doss et al 2011).

Our question, then, is this: if the global model of food activism has diffused to local food systems across the U.S., and Occupy served as a warning shot across the bow of commodity capitalism, have relocalization efforts sought to institutionalize broader participatory and non-market decision-making related to food? We address this question through field research that focuses on the role of women in Vermont’s food movement, where activism and innovation range from local and voluntary community efforts to an institutionalized state program supporting a farm-to-table development strategy, creating what might be called a center of the food democracy movement in the U.S., some would say without peer. Further, Vermont has a far higher rate of participation by women in farm ownership than the US average, and women play an even greater role in the relocalization movement in the state. The efforts of Vermonters, though in some ways relatively recent in depth and breadth of institutionalization, have deep roots, and so we find ample evidence to consider the role of women in emerging local food systems and the movement’s receptivity to questions of women’s empowerment.

Our research in rural Vermont suggests a rich potential that has yet to be fully realized. Indeed, as we see evidence for the greater participation of women in farming and farm related decision-making, we see few efforts to translate the emergence of rural women into a force with standing to demand greater rights for women, similar to the work of La Via Campesina to empower peasants around the world by directly empowering women to speak to their own concerns (Desmarais, 2009). As Pateman explored in her critique of democratic citizenship in the era of neoliberal globalization (1997), the emphasis on economic participation and the privatization of community has transformed the citizen from a political actor into an economic one, and we have found evidence that economic relocalization has offered limited opportunity for the empowerment of women as political actors within networks of community-based decision-making. Even when social action and scholarship have accounted for women as political and economic actors locally, though, it often is done so, as Freeman notes (2001), in ways that reinforce a gendered hierarchy that begins with a feminine local response to a global capitalism rendered masculine. In our research, we find, as others have in communities around the world, that women do differentiate their approach to food production and social networks from that of men, or that at times women are empowered locally in ways that set up conflict with global capitalist (and scientific) imperatives (Massicotte, forthcoming).

But in Vermont, women have work yet to do to claim standing as the purveyors of local knowledge and as political citizens within a local food system still very much indebted to a capitalist financial modelThe tension over women’s standing as citizens in rural Vermont, and what Young would consider the political responsibility – beyond blame or guilt – to address marginalizing structures of power that each of us is part of (2003), can be illustrated by a 2012 controversy over what a fundraising calendar for an innovative composting program in the small town of Hardwick. The staff of the Highfields Center was inspired by the work of a local photographer, who produced a series of portraits of women from the community that unraveled the notion of a pin up girl. One image in particular caught their attention, and they posted it to Highfields’ Facebook page: a woman in gold lamé balanced precariously in a tractor scoop above a pile of compost. But their project, supervised by two men on staff working with a woman as art director, took a different tack. Billed as “hotties and hummus,” they issued a casting call on their Facebook page “calling on all Hardwick ladies… to come together for the Hot Compost Photo Shoot to gather sexy photos of women and compost….” Backed by the endorsement of a local mechanic, the calendar went public on the internet with just two images of nearly naked women in compost, one chest down. When the calendar was criticized on Highfields’ Facebook page, one of the staffers involved defended himself by noting that he was romantically involved with the woman lying in the compost. Highfields’ apologized and the calendar was withdrawn.

We raise this issue not to blame or to stake a position on feminist debates over women’s agency and the objectification of women, but instead to suggest that it appears as if the staff at the Center was either ignorant of that debate or indifferent to it. Clearly, this calendar was not essential to their mission, and, in the end, neither was it a successful fundraising tool. It was, as they admitted, a poor idea poorly executed, though without malicious or sexist intent. For us, this incident raises the question of women’s standing, as citizens, to raise issues as and for women and not merely as collaborators with men in structures that perpetuate economic and gendered hierarchies. In many ways, it represents the same challenges women found at OWS: building an inclusive movement with a cohesive core that also addressed structural marginalization in ways that provided broader standing – to women and others (Seltzer, 2011). Looking to OWS, we see that Highfield’s blunder could have been avoided with the combination of training and participation the women at OWS considered possible only because of their presence.

With this in mind, we start our analysis with foundational assumptions. First, women globally fill vital roles in farming and rural life, which include house holding and subsistence farming. Second, this work is traditionally devalued politically and economically as non-market “women’s work.” Moreover, the treatment of so-called “women’s work” can extend to the work of women and men farmers and producers within local food systems even as they engage with food markets through processing and produce sales. Finally, women must overcome marginalization as farmers against a broad gender hierarchy reflected in social and professional networks that empower agripreneurial men, the attributions of knowledge and expertise that privilege a certain agricultural model dominated by men, and the practices that disempower women throughout their social lives.

While the literature on the representation of women in politics and the debates over specific proposals to advance the inclusion of women focus on either the particular or universal character of women, our analysis bypasses this debate to consider what it means to be a woman in food production. In this sense, what concerns us is how women within rural movements consider standing as both economic and political agents – farmers and producers, on one hand, and citizens on the other – to advocate on economic and social issues of concern to women. Of course such issues start with a seat at the table. But they also include women’s experiences of disempowerment, economic and social marginalization, and violence, and the ability to foster distinct approaches to cultivation that have been the domain of those women charged with carrying and applying such knowledge throughout much of the world. As well, drawing upon the transnational social movement literature, we consider if women advocate as women in rural communities while recognizing their potential as part of a global movement of rural women advocating for the rights of women. Do women in rural Vermont communities engage in “global thinking—what Tarrow identifies as a framing process where global symbols, interpretations and meanings enter domestic and local political struggles (Tarrow 2005: 68). In doing so, our goal is to analyze meanings and ideas central to the participatory democracy that is the heart of the food sovereignty and OWS movements and assess whether these movements’ commitment to dialogue and empowerment also can be found in the local food system in rural Vermont.

But first we offer a caution. This is neither a feminist approach to local food movements nor a critique of feminist political economy or food studies. Though we draw on this literature to suggest ways that women are and could be incorporated as citizens in alternative food movements, our primary focus, as it has been in much of our work in the past, is the sufficiency of local and alternative responses to globalization’s economic, political, and scientific imperatives. Through our focus on women as farmers and food producers, we suggest the political limitations of local food movements (and the political limitations therefore of global framing processes around food sovereignty) in the U.S. context that seek solely economic solutions to what are both political and economic challenges. Nor do we offer the radical challenge to liberal democracy that others who work on peasant and food movements embrace explicitly (Menser 2009; Conway and Singh 2011), though we look to this literature to problematize the relationship of social position to agency and empowerment, the interrelationship of forms of marginalization (such as location, class, and gender), and an expansive notion of political action in the face of neoliberal globalization.

**Food Sovereignty and the Localization of Participation**

The conceptualization of food sovereignty advanced nearly two decades ago by the international peasants’ movement, La Vía Campesina underscores a concern with democratic empowerment and participation: “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture…to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant…it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production” (Rosset 2003). La Vía Campesina’s origins overlap with the heyday of neoliberalism in the early 1990s, as many academic and political observers had become enthralled with “end of ideology” theses that suggested that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the undermining of its communist, command economy model, marked the irrefutable triumph of the United States and its capitalist, market orthodoxy model. La Vía Campesina emerged in reaction to the evolving neoliberal ideological emphasis on the liberalization of trade and investment, deregulation and privatization, tax cuts and elimination of social programs embodied in various free trade agreements and institutions of regional or global economic governance such as NAFTA, the IMF and World Bank, the EU and the WTO (Desmarais 2007). La Vía Campesina evolved from its founding in 1993 in Belgium through a strong sense of unity between the challenges being experienced by farmers in both the developing South and industrialized North. Reitan argues that through transnational scale shift, La Vía Campesina spread globally, remaining strongly rooted in local places but networking from local to national to global, developing a strong presence amongst small-scale farmers organizations, indigenous peoples and peasants from Brazil to India to France (Reitan 2007: 152). The symbolic “glue” that connected La Vía Campesina at different scales is the concept of food sovereignty, which by the end of the 1990s had become a master collective action frame that provided groups at different scales and in different locales and national settings with an alternative framework to neoliberalism.

It is important to appreciate especially how the idea of “sovereignty” has been juxtaposed against the perceived local and national impacts of neoliberalism. What this conceptualization of sovereignty as developed by La Vía Campesina clearly taps into is the widespread concern with neoliberal globalization’s so-called “democratic deficit.” Moghadam’s discussion of neoliberal democratic deficits is helpful for understanding how the call for food sovereignty has become a global collective action frame shared at different scales—and clearly appropriated as we will show by food activists in Vermont—for expressing and underscoring meanings associated with a sense of both the economic injustice associated with neoliberal policies and the narrow, political limitations of democracy in the neoliberal era:

1) the displacement of decision making from the local or national domain,

2) huge income inequalities and the concentration of wealth among an ever-

smaller proportion of the population, 3) the capture of government by the

business sector and other moneyed concerns, and 4) the tendency of some

democratic transitions to marginalize women and minorities” (Moghadam

2013: 75).

Given its reliance on local participation, grower-consumer interactions, and the revival of systems of cooperation and trust (a commons) outside capitalist doctrines of competitive markets, any notion of food sovereignty either confronts structural power across a range of institutions or reinscribes exclusions for the many as it wrestles with inclusion for the few. When linked conceptually and politically through a broad notion of rural and peasant-farmer empowerment and participatory decision-making, food sovereignty and democracy must address questions of social marginalization represented by colonial and gendered relations of power. Clearly, the number of women in agriculture and variations in access to resources are sufficient to underscore this claim. In our research, we focus on gender in the food sovereignty movement through three dimensions that help assess the quality of citizenship afforded internally to women.

First, how and when do such systems include forms of knowledge about production, markets, and consumption that are perfected and perpetuated outside of exclusive institutions and networks? Much of the literature considers these indigenous knowledges through their relationship to women’s empowerment in postcolonial settings—what Vandana Shiva calls “grandmother’s knowledge” (Massicotte forthcoming; Saleh 2009; Patel 2007; Rocheleau et al, 1996). In rural Vermont, where women are re/turning to the land, this can be as well shared and acquired knowledge as a form of commons outside institutional settings, as it is in many parts of the global south pressured by land grabs, industrialization, and market forces. As a result, knowledge might be acquired from afar and brought back home in a way that defies both the colonial-postcolonial dichotomy as well as notions of indigeneity. This is certainly the case with Vermont cheese producers and bakers who are learning a craft often rooted in other locales, but also Vermont farmers who are travelling widely and scouring the internet. As well, knowledge might be protected from acquisition by outsiders, as entrenched and male hierarchies develop agripreneurial networks that combine local imperatives and capitalist strategies in ways that exclude women practitioners from its acquisition or render their participation in knowledge development difficult, and this can include knowledge about production as well as resources and markets. What is most apparent, then, is the gendered nature of access to knowledge and the types of networks that guard and promote it.

Second, is women’s productive work as valued as that of men? The literature in feminist political economy on the roles of women in global markets provides a useful lens for interrogating this question, as it links structures of economic and social power through both local and global notions of gender valuation (Bair 2010). Though much of this work is concerned with women in industrial production (Caraway 2007; Pun 2005; Pena 1998), or with local responses among women to the pressures of globalization (Freeman, 2001), it is important to note that feminist scholars are attempting to disentangle the equation of local with feminist opposition and global with masculine domination, as Freeman does. Equally of concern is the ways that women participate in the local and global economies outside of recognized market activities – in a sense, beyond the male gaze – that is addressed in the literature on the economic contributions of households and women within those households (Safri and Graham 2010; Waring 1998; Luxton 1997; Ironmonger 1996; Folbre 1995;). This can include village industrial models as well as sustenance farming, when men are more likely to participate in the recognized cash economy and women’s participation is hidden from dominant institutions as exclusively the production of food for the family from seed to pot. In Vermont, the notion of household work might include small farmers who participate in small networks or non-market distribution systems, be these farmers men or women.

Finally, and related to the first two, is the question of standing. Whether for the market or not, women’s productive activities are economic, and as food sovereignty advocates promote decision-making structures they see as alternatives to capitalist market imperatives, they are not arguing that food production is outside of economic activity. Clearly, the broader peasant movement considers “the rural” to be a location of both political and economic activity, and the identity of peasant to be as much about production as it is about location. This focuses our attention, as Polanyi did in the last century (Polanyi 2001), on notions of reciprocity and relationships of trust and obligation within economic activity, so that the economic is part of the social. When the local moves to the rural U.S., does “farmer” maintain its social sense, so that women as farmers have the same standing as men? In other words, does the local overcome notions of gender just by virtue of being local, or does it require additional political work? This is particularly important, as we will see, because women’s farm activity in Vermont is less productive (in market terms) than that of men. If the local remains market driven, then, would women’s standing be limited by their economic contribution?

Via Campesina, the global peasant-farmer movement that laid the foundation for claims to food sovereignty – and hence food democracy in North America – serves as a model for addressing gender through the local response to the globalization of industrial food. Almost from its start in 1993, LVC placed women’s empowerment alongside all peasant claims as a necessary function of the struggle (Desmarais 2009). Recognizing the difficulties they faced in recruiting and promoting women within a global peasant-farmer organization – when women carry the burden for farm labor throughout much of the world and suffer a variety of inequalities and forms of marginalization – LVC delegates at the initial international meetings were disappointed by the small number of women in attendance. This was true in particular because one woman who was there called it to their attention. But the organization developed a plan to address women’s inequality from within, including a women’s meeting just before each international conference, to promote and empower women. Soon LVC mandated that at least half of all positions on the governing council go to women. Women’s issues became intractably part of peasant-farmer issues and the struggles against neoliberal globalization, and the third women’s conference adopted a resolution that tied violence against women – perpetrated within peasant and farmer communities – to the violence LVC describes within global industrial agriculture, stating, “if we do not eradicate violence toward women within our movement, we will not advance in our struggles…” (Desmarais, 25).

In India, LVC cofounder Vandana Shiva has led an organic farming and rural empowerment movement that relies in no small measure on the work of women. Navdanya is at the same time a scientific endeavor, a community center, and an advocacy group. Their work includes the promotion of community seed banks and a seeds common to retake sovereignty over a fundamental aspect of agriculture, training of organic farmers, and the acquisition and promotion of site and crop specific solutions. They have organized a network across 17 Indian states that includes 111 community seed banks and what they cite as the largest organic distribution system in the country.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Shiva embeds Navdanya’s organizing – and hence that of the global food sovereignty movement – in what she calls “grandmother’s knowledge” as the primary source for the local response to the neoliberal model of industrial agriculture predicated on western science.[[2]](#footnote-2) This she describes as a kind of common sense, practical and effective knowledge developed to address the needs and challenges in particular locations. While much research has been done on the preservation and promotion of indigenous knowledge by rural women, often within a feminist critique of science and as part of a gendered notion of the local (Massicotte forthcoming; Patel 2010; Rocheleau et al 1996; Harding 1991), the call to “grandmother’s knowledge” adds a strong generational component. Lost under the pressures to industrialize and produce for larger markets through the introduction of patent protected seeds, pesticides, and herbicides, grandmother’s knowledge harkens back to the more biodiverse and productive practices of the past that promise greater autonomy for communities and a broader sense of a rural commons. It is not a knowledge that is carried by today’s peasants and farmers – be they men or women – but must be revived, cultivated, and promoted, not simply passed from mother to daughter. And as grandmother’s knowledge, it privileges age and gender in a way that recognizes the role of women in local agriculture but insists that this knowledge is something that each must learn anew. At the same time, Navdanya advocates for and advances the empowerment of women in agriculture and the role of women in social life generally through its Women for Diversity program.

Both the opportunities and the limits of this approach were visible during a study trip to Navdanya’s Bija Vidyapeeth education center and farm outside Dehradun in Northern India.[[3]](#footnote-3) Bija Vidyapeeth serves as a model seed bank and provides programs for foreign and Indian farmers and students. One participant in their community building projects, a Gujarati woman displaced early in her life from her town in the Himalayas by a large hydroelectric project early, explained how her work with Navdanya provided both economic improvement for her family and status in the community for her.[[4]](#footnote-4) With her husband in the military, the farm was her sole responsibility and served primarily to feed her family, provide resources for bartering, and some minor market income. With Navdanya, she began coordinating local women farmers to bank seeds and encourage traditional agricultural techniques and crops. She became a leader in the program locally and internationally, attending the Slow Food Convivium in Italy, and earning sufficient income to send all her children to college. Others who worked with Navdanya in promoting the leadership of women in the production of village crafts reported similar success, finding ways for women’s cooperatives to break through India’s tightly regulated and male dominated distribution system for these products.

However, the farm itself still exhibits social hierarchies linked to the gendered nature of educational opportunities in rural areas, and unusual within the national management structure of Navdanya. Though the heart of the farm is the seed bank and the production and promotion of heritage seeds, the farm office was dominated by the more educated men who speak English and were able to communicate with the students and visitors who come to the farm. Bija Devi, the primary seed keeper and inspiration for the program, occupies herself exclusively with the day to day activities of the farm, and much of the farm labor is done by men and women from the local community who have little interaction with the educational programming of the farm. Some of the men in management, as is typical in rural India, remain at Navdanya much of the year, away from their wives and children who live in rural areas far away.

Despite these limitations, La Via Campesina and Navdanya provide models for the structural inclusion of women in the local response to the global industrial food system. Closer to home, Occupy Wall Street suggests a possible domestic source of inspiration for the US local food movement. The decentered and participatory decision-making process pursued at Zuccotti Park and across the OWS movement certainly risks domination by privileged and empowered voices even as it attempts to create greater participation. At the same time, many of the women and people of color who joined the movement also saw within these structures the opportunity to increase the diversity of voices. Two mechanisms enables this strategy: first, the ability of any individual to bloc a resolution or vote if the proposal would compel that person to leave made it possible for women to sideline an early mission statement that many felt diminished the historic experiences of women and people of color, but in doing so it gave them the necessary – if initially hesitant – ability to be heard; second, stacked participation enabled facilitators to prioritize voices for historically marginalized groups to speak first or in greater numbers to ensure that their voices were heard. In addition, both education and consciousness raising were central to the occupation, giving women the ability to organize with and learn from each other as well as educate men about forms of differentiation that empower men at the expense of women (Seltzer 2011). That is not to say that this work required little effort or made inclusion possible across the occupy movement; far from it. But for many of these women, structured opportunities provided a means to address racism and sexism when it was evident. As one reporter explained, “the process of direct democracy directly counters the experiences of their lives” (ibid, online).

**Global Framing and Local Food Systems in Vermont**

In September 2012, a group of several dozen Vermont farmers and citizens gathered outside a Doubletree Hotel in the suburb of South Burlington, greeting the attendees of the Vermont Feed Dealers Association conference with protest signs declaring their opposition to Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Holding signs emblazoned with such slogans as, “NO GMO,” “Sustainable Corporate Dominance,” and “Friends Don’t Let Friends Plant Monsanto,” the protesters lined the access road to the hotel so the attendees—arriving to see a speech soon to be delivered by Vice President for National Affairs of the Monsanto Corporation—were faced with the show of opposition to genetically engineered crops and foods in the state of Vermont. In comments at a news conference following the protest, representatives of several small family farms that participate in Burlington-area Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), including Flack Family Farm and Full Moon Farm, as well as the director of Rural Vermont, a nonprofit food advocacy organization that opposes corporate industrial agricultural practices in the state, espoused a vision of an ecologically sustainable and diverse agricultural community, free of corporate control and GMOs. In articulating her stance against Monsanto and global corporate agribusiness, Rachel Nevitt of Full Moon Farm declared, “what is sustainable here folks is our voice of dissent…our desire for honest and just, moral and environmental action must be sustained” (Spring 2012).

In fact, food activists in the state of Vermont were busy throughout 2012, as the Vermont Right to Know GMOs coalition engaged in protest actions and rallied thousands of Vermonters against genetically engineered foods or GMOs. The Vermont Right to Know GMOs coalition, a cooperative project of three major statewide advocacy groups—Rural Vermont, NOFA-VT (Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont) and VPIRG (Vermont Public Interest Research Group)—collaborated on a number of claims-making tactics designed to give Vermonters access to GMOs information by requiring the labeling of genetically engineered food products sold at retail outlets in the state of Vermont. The core messages in the Vermont Right to Know GMOs campaign—the right to know what is in one’s food, the ability to make informed choices, and the ability to choose whether to buy genetically engineered food or not—echoed concerns expressed on the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil that same spring, as peasants, small farmers, indigenous peoples, migrants, consumer and food activists converged on the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. Dubbed the third “Earth Summit,” following previous global meetings in Stockholm in 1972 and Rio in 1992, this massive world gathering of tens of thousands of activists mobilized to oppose the “commodification of life” and to challenge the official summit of governments to consider alternatives to the neoliberal global agricultural model. What arguably tied these two mobilization campaigns together was a process of “global framing”, through mobilization of the concept of “food sovereignty” and a vision of a decentralized food system that meets the needs of the local communities, supports local farmers and sustains the working landscape.

Global framing, while considered the most domestic of transnational political processes, involves the manipulation of meanings, ideas and interpretations of at different scales, from the local, national to the global. Specifically, global framing involves the use of internationally recognized symbols and meanings to shape local or national claims making—when international symbols frame domestic conflicts (Tarrow 2005: 32)—as local activists consciously connect to and borrow from globally recognized messages in campaigns. Activists engage in framing processes to create simple, easy-to-understand messages or meanings, frequently highlighting the injustice of a particular context or policy, in the hopes of attracting greater numbers of participants to their cause. A collective action frame contains the meanings or messages activists use to “dignify claims, connect them to others, and help to produce a collective identity” (Tarrow 2011: 144), helping to “underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable” (Snow and Benford 1992: 137). Global framing, then, connects local and global concerns, in a process of dignifying claims where oftentimes marginalized groups find their concerns legitimized by connecting them to much more widely publicized global actions and campaigns.

Global framing around the concept of food sovereignty illustrates how local grievances about food access, safety, production and distribution in the small state of Vermont have become increasingly intertwined with more widespread concern and global opposition to the political economy effects of neoliberal market orthodoxy that has especially shaped global agricultural policies over the past two decades. Vermont has a well-recognized history as an independent-minded, countercultural, grassroots-oriented state, whose citizens for centuries have emphasized direct democracy, local citizenship and small-scale frugality (Ayres and Bosia 2011). In more recent years, Vermont’s “back-to-nature” political and cultural traditions have created a social infrastructure ideal for nurturing the development of a grassroots rebellion in defense of the place of food, as it has become a state that has been in the vanguard of what Starr and Adams describe as local actions as anti-globalization claims-making (Starr and Adams 2003). Farmers markets, urban gardening projects, farm-to-plate restaurants, community bartering, food cooperatives and local currencies flourish in Vermont, localized actions that reflect a preference for local empowerment over how food is grown, sold and distributed as well as a small-scale reaction against perceived threats to Vermont’s unique traditions from global economic forces. As Patel has argued, at its most basic, food sovereignty is a radical egalitarian call for social change, and is concerned with a palpable inequality in power, and through global framing processes Vermont food activists appropriate the food sovereignty message to “challenging deep inequalities of power” that are the “core of food sovereignty” (Patel 2009: 670).

The ongoing “Vermonters Feeding Vermonters” Local Food Sovereignty Campaign clearly illustrate how food sovereignty has been appropriated to shape contentious claims-making around food across the state, which again is drawing upon Vermont’s long tradition embracing localism as a countervailing force against wider national or global political and economic pressures. The statewide social and economic advocacy group Rural Vermont has been spearheading the local food sovereignty campaign over the past two years collaborating with the Vermont Coalition for Food Sovereignty as well as farmers, engaged citizens and such grassroots organizations as the Brattleboro, Vermont-area Post Oil Solutions to encourage towns across the state to pass resolutions in support of food sovereignty (Russell 2012). During Town Meeting Day in March 2012—Vermont’s still vibrant practice of citizen local, direct democracy in the classic New England town hall tradition—Rural Vermont successfully organized eight communities to pass Local Food Sovereignty Resolutions to support Vermont’s community-based food systems. Encouraging towns across the state to connect the discussions in local sovereign contexts by embracing local food systems, the resolutions (some tailored to particular concerns of each town) declared:

“We declare the right of communities to produce, process, sell and purchase

local foods. In recognition of Vermont’s traditional agricultural systems,

we assert these vital principles as the foundation of local Food Sovereignty.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

While Rural Vermont informs interested citizens that it is not formally a member of La Vía Campesina, it is a member of the National Family Farm Coalition, which is part of La Vía Campesina, and it asserts that “we are all working toward a similar goal of economic justice for all farmers…Rural Vermont has taken the concept of local Food Sovereignty and made it unique to our state’s agricultural and political systems.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

What is clearly at work here is a process of global framing where processes of transnational attribution (Reitan 2007: 19) are connecting Rural Vermont’s efforts around local food sovereignty initiatives in the small state of Vermont with similar themes of local empowerment, family and community farming and environmental sustainability on display during the mass mobilizations around food sovereignty and People’s Summit at the Rio UN +20 conference (Global Justice Ecology Project 2012). Calais Farmer Peter Harvey, a resident of one of the Vermont towns that passed a resolution in support of food sovereignty in 2012, stated,

Food Sovereignty is about taking back our basic rights to be able to choose

what we eat in a country and state that increasingly is forcing us to eat

industrially manufactured food. Food Sovereignty is about allowing people

to eat food that their neighbors grow, produce, and share on a small local scale,

without the threat of violence from the giant food industry and state government regulators.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To be sure, global framing around food sovereignty in Vermont has not created formal and sustained collaborative cross-border networks between Vermont farmers and farmers in other countries. Yet, in the local food sovereignty campaign in Vermont we can see how local activists cognitively link to symbols, meanings and ideas that resonate global through different scales in diverse local, national and global food sovereignty campaigns, and as such are participating in processes of transnational contention that link at least symbolically and ideationally activists from remote corners of the world.

**Participation of Women in Vermont’s Local Food System**

Our research measure the participation of women in Vermont’s local food system in two ways: first, as food producers, and also as participants in community building and advocacy work in support of farm-to-table and local food system initiatives. In a state that has built such a substantive formal and informal infrastructure, and has experienced such significant transformation in agriculture – both in recent history and over the past decade – these two areas provide a logical first step in examining where and how women’s standing is recognized. Granted, this evidence is not exhaustive; but it does suggest where and how women are included, what domains privilege women’s agency, and in what areas women are limited.

As Appendix 1 and 2 illustrate, Vermont has undergone a substantive transformation in the gendered nature of farming at the same time the state has transitioned from a primarily dairy-based agricultural economy to a diverse farm system.[[8]](#footnote-8) While Vermont has had a higher percentage of farms owned by women than nationally, the last ten years have seen a substantial increase in the number of women in farming. As reported in the 2007 Census, the rate of women ownership increased by more than a third, and at that time accounted for more than 20 percent of farm ownership. This of course does not include the continued transformation of farm ownership patterns in the past 5 years, and we anticipate a much higher ownership rate in the upcoming census. At the same time, however, the productivity of farms owned by women, measured as a percentage of the value of all farm crops, is lower than the average, both nationally and in Vermont, and significantly so in the state. While women-owned farms were more than a fifth of the farms in the Green Mountain state, crop value for their operations was just over 5 percent of all crop values. In other words, women-owned farms were one fifth productive as the average farm in dollar terms. And while women farm ownership is rarer nationally, women farmers across the country actually produce a higher share of farm crop value than in Vermont, with their share of crop value at 42 percent of the ownership rate.

While not yet subject to statistical measure, anecdotal evidence demonstrates that women are present throughout the local food production and distribution system in Vermont. Women own and operate restaurants, cafes and bakeries that emphasize local farm products, they produce cheese and a variety of value added foods from kimchee to flavored syrups, they own small food markets and manage farmers markets and cooperatives in small towns and in Burlington, and they operate a variety of food service kitchens from catering to institutional cafeterias that purchase an increasing share of local farm production. While not traditionally counted as agricultural activity, local food system analysis has broadened the view of participation to include a variety of these value added and distribution activities as integrated in the agricultural economy, especially as they promote local food products.

In terms of community organizing and advocacy, the evidence gathered in 2011 is again mixed. In Appendix 3, we see that Rural Vermont, the state’s LVC affiliate, has achieved gender parity on its governing board, though that is largely through the inclusion of mixed gender couples who own farms together. At the other extreme, the Center for an Agricultural Economy in Hardwick – where Highfields Center for Compositing is located and is itself a national model for local food system development – has struggled to include two women on its eight member board. Indeed, locals often refer to the leadership of the organization as “the boys” (Hewitt 2010). With this noteworthy exception, gender parity in governance is widely practices across a number of community-based organizations in Vermont, with some indicating a super majority of women members. At the management level, we see even greater representation of women as professional staff, with women in 2011 holding half of the management positions at all measured organizations except for Highfields Center. This includes Hardwick’s Center for an Agricultural Economy, where all staff positions except for executive director were held by women at the time.[[9]](#footnote-9) Women also held the top position at two of the six most important local food related non-profit organizations in the state.

We suggest two related factors to consider in analyzing these trends. In terms of farm ownership and crop value, our field work suggests that many women say they are less interested in farm revenues and more concerned with the social aspects of farming, including the preservation of the working landscape and the promotion of community. Measured just in terms of farming, this evidence is born out in the work of the Women’s Agricultural Network in Vermont, where director Mary Peabody noted that there are a variety of reasons women-owned farms are less lucrative on average, including crop type and herds, farm size, and a greater priority on community-building over revenues.[[10]](#footnote-10) Similarly, there is an ongoing tension between the agripreneurial perspectives of an emerging network of value added operators building a broad product market through the localist discourse, including those represented on the board of the Center for an Agricultural Economy in Hardwick, and the advocacy for food sovereignty and democracy through the transformation of the rural economy, which is more evident in the work of LVC affiliate Rural Vermont. In other words, the return to the local as a form of market oriented economic activity enables traditional business practices and networks that segregate along class and status lines, while advocacy oriented work moves toward community building and local participation brings farmer and consumers together in collaboration. If women turn to farming because they are more eager to contribute to community and sustainability than profit, the business oriented model of Center for an Agricultural Economy might have less interest in their farming activity just as these women would have less interest in the priorities of the Center.

These differences might best be illustrated by the different responses when fires destroyed facilities at rural operations not far from the northern Vermont community of Hardwick in 2011. When Pete’s Greens of Craftsbury, Vermont, lost the barn that served as packaging and storage facilities for the state’s largest organic vegetable farm – including the stored crops that provided produce for their winter farm share – the reaction in the community was immediate and profoundly evocative of the new rural economy. This was not the first barn fire in the area. A family dairy lost the barn and their entire herd not long before. But Pete Johnson, the farms owner, has a wide distribution network, reaching into the Boston area and across Vermont, and is well connected in agripreunerial circles through his own efforts and as a member of the Center for an Agricultural Economy. This includes “the boys” who talk often of their monthly meetings and how they help each other identify and secure resources or provide a short term fix when necessary (Hewitt 2010). Among this group is Jasper Hill Farms, a cheese maker founded in 2003 that has built a 22,000 square feet cheese cave after detonating part of a hillside, only possible with the unique mix of investors and grants, including a nearly $1.5 million in loan guarantees from the federal government in 2007 and 2012.[[11]](#footnote-11)

So with his reputation and acumen and tight knit group, businesses and individuals were eager to donate to the farm’s survival, and various efforts across northern Vermont resulted in sufficient funds to replace the lost barn with an $800,000 processing and storage complex that now dominates the rural landscape.[[12]](#footnote-12) Johnson responded in similar spirit, and after opening the new barn in just under a year, he put $40,000 into a fund to help small farmers in crisis, administered by the CAE, though others on the board of the CAE board had encouraged more entrepreneurial investments for the funds.

In the fall of that same year in nearby Albany, Vermont, Marisa Mauro lost the buildings where she produced Ploughgate Creamery’s award winning small batch cheeses. A smaller producer with limited resources, Marisa is typical of the women interviewed for this project. When they develop networks, it is more often about an array of supportive resources beyond financial ones, and in no case did any participant indicate access to the kinds of financial resources that became available to Pete. Marisa’s operation closed, and she worked in a food related retail business while looking for opportunities. Two years later, her proposal was selected by the Vermont Land Trust to conserve the working landscape at a 48 acres farm in central Vermont, almost two hours from her original facility, which the Trust had acquired the year before. The local communities immediately surrounding the farm have joined in as well, partnering with the Trust and, at this writing, promising to raise $250,000 to complete the project.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Conclusions: Food Sovereignty and the Gendered Commons**

With few exceptions, we found that women working in the local food system in Vermont – from non-profit leadership to farms, restaurants to specialty products – noted that women faced obstacles, sometimes describing this from personal experience and other times from observation.[[14]](#footnote-14) In this section, we draw from these interviews to consider the standing of women as agricultural practitioners and citizens in the emerging local food system in Vermont from three perspectives: first, how do women experience and assess difference between men and women in food production; second, what goals do these women bring to agricultural production and in what ways do such goals shape the work they do as producers and as women; finally, how do women structure their own networks and what do they share within these networks. Our goal here is to understand how women participate in the local food system as practitioner-citizens, and how this is realized within a local food response that goes beyond local realization of food sovereignty to one that is on the one hand socio-political and on the other economic. None of these finding are in fact unusual – they reflect gender structures that are well studied in the literature. We report them here to interrogate the claims of participatory inclusion within the local food movement in Vermont within the context of a global food system sensitive to women’s equality, to affirm that women in progressive circles – just like those at OWS – still experience these structured hierarchies, and so to suggest why women participate in the localization movement in the ways that they do.

It has been our contention that the bifurcated nature of the local food movement has the potential to create political disadvantages if economic hierarchies dominate, or if politics fails to overcome established structures for the distribution of political and economic resources. In terms of a more participatory local food system, one that promises greater and equal standing as citizens both in social and economic terms on the question of food production and distribution, a split in the US approach to food sovereignty and food democracy remains evident in the experiences of women across the three perspectives. The call for food sovereignty resonates in Vermont—global framing has brought meanings and interpretations of more independent, local and grassroots approaches to growing and distributing food to Vermont—but we find limits to food sovereignty’s collective action frame encouraging a more dramatic change in political and social hierarchies. Women to varying degrees have been subject to barriers, they develop largely similar approaches to food production that prioritize the social over the economic, and though they more often than not work together as women in agriculture, they only rarely prioritize issues effecting women more generally.

However, it is important to note that, while the women we interviewed reflected much of what the statistical evidence captures as well, women do not stand alone in small scale local farming and food production. In fact, most of the women in our study have worked alongside men – as business partners, collaborators, or spouses – who share their approach to local food systems and their commitment to the community. Indeed, co-author Bosia was a co-owner of a respected restaurant that, as part of the local food system in Hardwick, circulated more than $1 million in sales through purchases and employment within 15 miles of its doors during the 4 years he was involved with the operation, working with a woman as business partner who managed the finances and a woman manager as well as his husband, the chef. So we do not argue that women dominate a sector of local food systems, but that women as participants in the local food system are much more likely to be present in this sector, eschewing the larger scale, profit-focused economic alternative within the local food movement – which many of them openly consider the domain of men.

The women in our study report a variety of social exclusions based on gender and male privilege, though nothing significant enough to keep them from their work. For those in certain technical fields where men dominate as gatekeepers, like beekeeping and restaurant work, men discouraged women from acquiring or demonstrating the necessary knowledge to become successful producers. Kim Greenwood transitioned from a career as a mechanical engineer to beekeeping, and though she found more discrimination in her original field, the older men who dominated beekeeping when she started were resistant to acknowledging women as equals and remain so, requiring Greenwood and the women who have come along since to prove their ability as beekeepers. Women in baking and restaurant work report similar experiences, with male colleagues more reluctant to embrace them as skilled professionals or acknowledge their ability to contribute. Though some attribute this to personality differences – an emphasis on individualism vs. teamwork, for example – it remains that in their experiences as they relate them, such differentiations follow gender lines. When Rachel Barone assumed full responsibility for managing the bakery business he opened with her husband, many larger supplies insisted on asking for him whenever she called, until they finally accustomed themselves to doing business with a woman. Even those who report little sense of a gender hierarchy in their work in Vermont indicate that when they leave the state, the men they work with men can be dismissive.

Perceptions based on expectations about physical ability were intertwined with notions of skill as well, with farm women reported that men often doubt a woman’s ability to operate machinery like tractors. In this sense, gendered notions of the physicality of farm labor are affirmed through a masculinized sense of such work even as more and more women embrace farming as professionals and not only as members of a farming family. These doubts might come about, as Peabody explained, because boys are more often raised with tools than are women.

Women in education and community organizing reported a variety of ways that notions of gender hindered the participation of women. Mary Peabody first notices gender as a part of farm work when she organized meetings for dairy farmers who needed assistance in long term planning. She found that women owners were reluctant to speak in rooms dominated by men, and waited until breaks in the official program in order to pepper her with questions. Jennifer Colby of the Vermont Grass Farmers Association was very succinct in her appraisal: “Until late, I have always felt underpaid and underappreciated, and I could not come up with any other reason than I was a female.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

At the same time, the women who participated in the study called attention to the distinct priorities that they bring to farming in Vermont and to the relocalization movement, directly in juxtaposition to what they describe as the goals of men, even as they recognize the shared commitment of the men in their lives. Situated within the tension over community-based efforts and those that prioritize financial imperatives, the women in our study described the willingness to secure financing through debt, to grow and expand operations, and to compete in a market as the priorities of men, while women, they explained, emphasized care for the land and the cultivation of community through food. Sometimes, these assessments displayed starkly contrasting world views, much like activists at OWS who situated themselves in opposition to the forms of market economics that place commodities and profits before human needs and community. Other women embraced the need to incorporate business strategies in their work, though they still described their efforts and business models as more cooperative and less competitive.

Working at the Women’s Agricultural Network, Peabody has made it her goal to support women in farming through access to traditional business models and financial mechanisms. She emphasized that women are much more reluctant to take on debt, for example, and this can inhibit a farm’s ability to expand to a size that is sufficient to be economically sustainable. These efforts have helped a number of the women in the study, especially new farmers and value added businesses, as they have structured operations through business planning, financial management, and access to resources. In many ways, these are useful for both traditional financing and the new government and non-profit grants and loans available to innovative food systems.

However, other women report that they or their peers are less concerned overall with income and more concerned with the connections they make in communities, and they are explicit in their love of the work they do over the need to improve their living standards or cash flow. For these women, the articulation of a mission and goals appear much more explicitly political in their rejection of growth and profit as motivating principles, instead placing the land and people as their primary focus. As Jacqueline Rieke explained, “Growth is central to those networks and that’s not central to my goals.”[[16]](#footnote-16) In her business, this differentiation between traditional business and community-oriented practices were as much a part of her daily management and relationship to her staff as they were a part of her emphasis on the broader community. Others express the same sentiment but in different ways. One business owner, for example, noted the tension between the need for her business to turn a profit and the financial condition of her customer base, who are more often farmers with limited cash resources. As a result, even as women address traditional financial considerations, they still do so in terms of a social balance that reflects community.

Women also described differences over social priorities between men and women. Men can be more attune to status and position, more demanding and vocal, more individualistic, and more competitive – all attributes that serve men well in the capitalist business model. “When I run into ego-driven chefs who think they are always right, I have problems,” one restaurant owner noted.[[17]](#footnote-17) Another indicated that she was much less likely to speak up in her networks; while she explained that the men involved were very vocal, she attributed this more to personality than to gender. A new young farmer who shares her work with her husband was dismissive of other young men of their age coming to Vermont to farm. She describes them as “mechanical and less holistic” in their approach to farming, wanting to “enforce their will” rather than learn from and respond to the land.[[18]](#footnote-18) This assessment of men is supported as well in gossip about high profile business owners with aggressive tempers and a penchant to fly off the handle in order to get their way.

As we’ve seen in the statistical data, differences in perspectives also reflect a differentiation in the scale of production, with the average value of crops produced by women lower than their share of farm ownership. Women farmers in particular often note that they consider their interactions with the community as important as their work in the soil, and much more important than profit, an approach that is compatible with the smaller scale farming they do in Vermont. In contrast, Pete Johnson from Pete’s Greens, the state’s largest organic vegetable producer, has been barred from one farmer’s market because he could not be present at his booth as much as their regulations required. Not only does scale create tensions between producers and markets, but it also creates conflicts between the smaller farms where women are more present and the larger and male-dominated producers with national markets. As illustration, one milk producer pointed to a dispute over the availability of non-pasteurized milk in the local food system, which is increasingly popular among health conscience consumers. Not long ago, state regulators stopped the raw milk classes at Rural Vermont – the LVC affiliate – and the state’s action was defended by one of the largest new cheese producer, Jasper Hill, the company started by two brothers in 2003 that has grown significantly through debt financing and a national market. As our young farmer explained, the cheesemaker’s brand is so tied to the image of Vermont that the threat of even a minor outbreak of disease placed their business interests ahead of the interests of the small community of producers and consumers who enjoy and make a living from locally sourced raw milk.[[19]](#footnote-19)

A few of the women in the study saw little difference between men and women in their day to day work. Enid Wannocott at the Northeastern Organic Farmers Associated explained that the men she worked with in Vermont shared the same philosophy about the land, farming, and the community as she did, and she experienced little sense of a gender hierarchy or difference in her years running the organization. That might in part be a reflection of the organizations goals and, as he explains, the fact that a majority of the members and staff are women. In a sense, her assessment demonstrated the fundamental veracity of one of our arguments: when women are present with equal standing as men, fundamental social structures that reinforce gender difference begin to change and the dynamics of interactions between men and women become more egalitarian as opposed to hierarchical.

In short, given these differences and the tensions they can produce, it is not surprising then that women tend to seek support in networks with other women or in networks with small producers like themselves. This includes the training and expertise offered by the Vermont Women’s Agriculture Network. Though their work is replicated by a variety of state and community-based programs, the women in the study were more likely to seek support at the network. As well, NOFA provides a great deal of political support, advocacy, and assistance, but it is as well dominated by women in membership, management, and governance. Women farmers and producers report working with other women as mentors, from restaurateurs to farmers. Often, the first generation of back-to-the-landers who arrived in the 1960s and 70s – both men and women – have served as inspiration and support for the emerging generation of women farmers. The women in our study were in fact purposeful in where and how they sought support, and in reaching out to assist and network with other women. Only a few women, though, worked directly on issues effecting women beyond those related to farming and food production, though it should be noted that Vermont has a strong network organizing against domestic violence, for example, reaching from more urbanized Burlington across the rural landscape.

**Appendices**

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1. http://www.navdanya.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shiva talks frequently about grandmother’s knowledge and one quote in particular is widespread on the internet. Here, we do not cite any particular source except a conversation Dr. Shiva had with Saint Michael’s College faculty and students at Navdanya in New Delhi in June 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Organized by the Environmental Studies Program at Saint Michael’s College, the study trip includes 10 days on the farm emphasizing biodiversity, and co-author Bosia, as a faculty leader, was able to interact with the farm team and conduct a limited number of interviews on campus and in the surrounding community. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Author’s interview, May 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.ruralvermont.org/issues-main/food-sovereignty/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.ruralvermont.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Talking-Points-and-FAQs.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.ruralvermont.org/press-releases/eight-communities-demonstrate-support-on-town-meeting-day-for-vermonters-feeding-vermonters/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This data is from the 2007 USDA agricultural census. With appreciation to Heather Davis, whose research informed us about the data and who shared her files with us. Heather Davis, “A Framework for Monitoring Local and Regional Food Systems,” SIT Graduate Institute Master’s Thesis in Sustainable Development, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. With the executive director’s reassignment in 2012, CAE hired a woman as executive director to serve a board where men still retain 6 of the 8 seats. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Interview, 4/17/2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Delegation announces $930,000 loan to Jasper Hill Farms, press release reprinted by VTDigger at http://vtdigger.org/2012/02/22/delegation-announces-930000-loan-to-jasper-hill-farms/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “Pete’s Greens Reopens After Fire,” *The Barre Montpelier Times Argus*, Dec 1, 2011, http://www.timesargus.com/article/20111201/THISJUSTIN/712019926/1003/NEWS02 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Artisanal butter maker selected by VLT as farmer for Bragg Fram,” by Lisa Loomis, The Valley Reporter November 21, 2012. http://www.valleyreporter.com/index.php/en/news/news/8450-artisanal-butter-maker-selected-by-vlt-as-farmer-for-bragg-farm [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. More than 20 women were interviewed for this project as part of Bosia’s 2012 Politics of Food class at Saint Michael’s College. Honors students Christopher Santoriello and Alyssa Malone were primary research assistants, and students conducted extensive interviews, recorded on audio, from a questionnaire developed with the class by the primary researchers. Three participants, included Lindsey Scott, submitted responses in writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Field Interview, 4/23/12 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Field interview, 4/26/2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Field interview, 4/22/2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Field interview, 4/28/2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Field Interview, May 3, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)