



Women of the Land: Beyond Agriculture

By ROOTS

Mexico is the cradle of splendid indigenous civilizations such as the Olmecs, Aztecs and Mayas. Its culture mixes indigenous traditions and elements of colonization. However, it is the indigenous communities, the heart of Mexican culture and the ones that preserve ancestral wisdom in everyday practices, that are the most affected by the outward-oriented development model.

Among this group of people are indigenous women, who are often the last in many things. To help them overcome the negative consequences of social inequality and the climate crisis, creative measures are required. In this article, ROOTS is going to share the experience of the Bioma Foundation, a Mexican organization that empowers indigenous women through agroecology, from a logic of traditional production with high added value.

The Bioma Foundation was established in 2012 in Puebla with the mission of helping indigenous women farmers in Mexico cope with climate change. Since the same year, it has offered training to women farmers, training them in the agroecological production of coffee, cocoa, vanilla, and cinnamon, among other crops, with the assistance of technical specialists.

Although the training programs are free, it is not easy for women farmers to participate in all classes, especially when they need to take care of their children. For this reason, the Foundation applies incentives to encourage women's participation: it develops training for the cultivation of vanilla, honey, and mole, which do not require the entire plot of land of the family, whose owner is usually the husband. In this way, women farmers have been able to have their "own business" and, at the same time, diversify the family economy.

In addition to working with crops that give women autonomy, the Foundation always seeks to ensure that the crop results in final products. In other words, all the programs seek to add value. It always works with collectives and turns them into cooperatives that achieve the necessary autonomy to trade.

In 2013, the Las Maravillas Acuex Women's Cooperative established the Training Center in the community of San Miguel Acuexcomac, Puebla, a greenhouse project to produce *miahuateco chile*. This is the main ingredient in *mole poblano*, a popular traditional Mexican food. Through the greenhouse, a micro-agro-industry has been developed in the community to produce *mole* in a package. The Center also uses the principles of organic agriculture for corn production through the use of bio-inputs.

Another significant project, involving twenty women with a vanilla training center, is from the Suamej Tonantzin organization. This organization purchases vanilla produced by small farmers. They receive training from planting to harvesting. Suamej Tonantzin sells finished products such as shampoo, soaps, handicrafts and vanilla extract and pods. It offers its products in the main cities of Mexico and places some products in export markets, such as France.

Coffee cooperatives such as Bajo Sombra sell to markets in Mexico and the honey cooperative "Suamej Nektli" is in the process of being formed. Their main product is *meliponini* honey.

Being agroecological, these products have an even greater value because they are also the fruits of traditional agriculture, a strategic practice for the country that is carried out on collective land.



Mexico has a unique agrarian property structure in the world: 50.7% of the land is social property thanks to the Zapatista revolutionary struggle of 1910. (Read the book review "Experiences of land reform in the world" by ROOTS to learn more about the Zapatista Revolution)

We are talking about 99.7 million hectares with 32,203 agrarian nuclei. As a result of the revolution, a little more than half of the surface area belongs to ejidos and communities, where traditional agriculture is normally applied. This concept suffered a setback in 1991 when the Chamber of Deputies approved a series of amendments to the Constitution that put an end to agrarian distribution and privatized the land ownership of ejidos and indigenous communities but has experienced a recuperation in the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador since his election in 2018.

The current government has 3 pillars in the public area, two of which are aimed at traditional farmers: the Sembrando Vida program, which provides economic resources indirectly to farmers; and Production for Wellbeing, which promotes the ecological transition by transferring resources directly to two million producers.

The women of Puebla are defenders of community land and implementers of traditional agriculture. Beyond production, they are consolidating marketing, considered a key strategy for traditional agriculture. They are working both to establish points of sale in the country and to expand exports. Soon, the farmers will be able to take their products to Mexico City and sell them in a shared store.



In many Latin American countries, when a woman is good at a domestic task such as cooking and sewing, she is said to be "marriageable". Although this is such a colloquial expression people rarely think of the sexist undertone it contains when they use it, which implies the sense of feminine value tied to marriage. The most important meaning of the Bioma Foundation and others like it is that indigenous women, the most vulnerable group in society, are respected, have autonomy over their lives, and get praise not because they do their duty of care for the family, but because they are good farmers of chilli, coffee, or vanilla, professional agribusiness technicians, and excellent business owners.

Such is the case of rural women in Mexico, who distinguish themselves by being the guardians of the family, and community health and their great work to conserve and defend their biocultural heritage and their territory.