

## **Rural Workers and Union Participation: When you Know and Empowerment Transform into Public Policies**

*Trabajadores rurales y participación sindical: cuando conoces y el empoderamiento se transforma en políticas públicas*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article discusses the women farmers participation in Sintraf Serrinha, taking as a reference the following problem: what are the relations between the knowledge and the rural workers empowerment linked to Sintraf Serrinha with the achievements resulting from its claims agenda? Its aim is to analyze the relationship between the knowledge consolidation and the rural workers empowerment in Sintraf Serrinha and the goals / objectives achievement in its claims agenda. It is based on authors such as Butto and Hora (2008), Franco (2018), Hora and Butto (2014), Nascimento (2009, 2016, 2020), among others. Methodologically, it was guided by the qualitative approach, ethnosearch field research and semi-structured interview. It is concluded by emphasizing that the acquirements / knowledges and empowerment achieved by female farmers were essential for the consolidation of goals/objectives based on a feminist and sex/gender perspective, also showing themselves to be committed to societal models oriented by solidarity and by democratic substantiality.

**Keywords:** acquirements/knowledge, empowerment, farmers/rural workers, participation, public policies.

### **RESUMEN**

*El artículo analiza la participación de las agricultoras en Sintraf Serrinha, tomando como referencia el siguiente problema: ¿cuáles son las relaciones entre el conocimiento y el empoderamiento de los trabajadores rurales vinculados a Sintraf Serrinha con los logros resultantes de su agenda de reclamos? Su objetivo es analizar la relación entre la consolidación del conocimiento y el empoderamiento de los trabajadores rurales en Sintraf Serrinha y el logro de metas / objetivos en su agenda de reclamos. Se basa en autores como Butto y Hora (2008), Franco (2018), Hora y Butto (2014), Nascimento (2009, 2016, 2020), entre otros. Metodológicamente, se guió por el enfoque cualitativo, la investigación de campo etnosearch y la entrevista semiestructurada. Se concluye enfatizando que las adquisiciones / conocimientos y el empoderamiento logrado por las mujeres agricultoras fueron fundamentales para la consolidación de metas / objetivos basados en una perspectiva feminista y sexo / género, mostrándose también comprometidas con modelos societarios orientados por la solidaridad y la sustancialidad democrática.*

**Palabras clave:** *adquisiciones/conocimientos, empoderamiento, agricultores/trabajadores rurales, participación, políticas públicas.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Historically characterized by land concentration, economic traditionalism and droughts, the Sisal Territory has generated very low levels of human development - on average 0.60 - according to data from the document «V State Culture Conference: Sisal Territory». Established, these extremely low human development levels, as we highlighted (2009), did not represent something visible enough to be named because they found expression in the harsh routine of those who dealt daily with the most acute droughts side - rural women farmers. Almost always invisible subjects, we pointed out (2020), they had little or almost no autonomy in the private space. Thus, in view of these exclusion/oppression processes experienced by these women, the analysis of Moraes (1998) and Meyer (2003) about the contributions of feminist and sex/gender analysis

took on meaning, as a way not only to question the traditional ones power relations between men and women, as well as to strengthen the participation culture and the achievement of public policies in the field.

Taking as reference the thesis «Rural workers and empowerment: conjugal relations and family life of women union leaders» (Nascimento, 2009), this article was produced which intends to address the following question: what are the relations between the knowledge and the empowerment of the rural women workers linked to Sintraf Serrinha<sup>1</sup> with the achievements resulting from its claims agenda? The aim of the article is to analyze the relationship between the consolidation of knowledge and the empowerment of rural workers in Sintraf Serrinha and the achievement of goals/objectives in their claims agenda. As a way to deepen the discussion in focus, in the lines that follow, the theoretical and methodological foundations are presented, as well as the analysis and concluding considerations of this study.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

Originating from a locus marked by authoritarian political practices, with family relationships crossed by a strong patriarchal trait through participation in Sintraf Serrinha, rural women and emerged in a scenario of oppression/exploitation. According to Franco (2018), following the footsteps of one of its main precursors, Margarida Alves, they assumed and reinvented themselves as a category to be respected in the private and public spaces by facing the effects of the invisibility of their condition of gender and the exclusion they have historically been subjected to in the Sisal Territory.<sup>2</sup>

The process rescue of rural women and workers participation implied not only in the democratic deepening of organizations like Sintraf/Serrinha, but the transformations that, related to the knowledge empowerment/consolidation, to some extent reverberated in the achievement of goals/objectives of their claims agenda and proved to be relevant, as Moraes (1998) and Meyer (2003) would say, not only for questioning the traditional power relations between men and women, as well as for strengthening the participation culture in the territories. Fundamental process, if we consider the prevalence - as Lüchmann (2006) would say - of the instrumental and individualistic character of the democratic model prevalent in certain contexts. A model which despised citizens, especially those socially most vulnerable.

As a result, pointed out Hora and Butto (2014), of the movements struggle led by farmers/rural workers, the articulated approach of sex/gender relations in the countryside was a consequence of the tensions between different interests and conflicts demarcated by inequalities between men and women that persisted and were naturalized over time and space. Such naturalization found an echo in institutional spaces, given that historically rural women rural workers have not been sufficiently recognized by the State and by Brazilian society. A fact that revealed, according to Butto and Hora (2008), the hegemony of patriarchy in the genesis of Brazilian society.

The oppressions/exclusions resulting from this hegemony generated the counterpart of the questionings and activism/movements of rural workers. Here, the relevance emerged, as we highlighted (2009), of the struggles unleashed by the rural women workers at the head of Sintraf/Serrinha against sex/gender inequalities in favor of their claims agenda. Process unequivocally marked by an educational dimension, as we have seen (2009). From our point of view (2020), participation enabled the transition from common sense to critical awareness through Popular Education,<sup>3</sup> which, according to Paludo (2001), gained notoriety through progressive movements based on the knowledge and popular culture valorization with a view to strengthening the socially most vulnerable classes.

These educational concept foundations, pointed out Paludo (2001), were based on theoretical matrices and concrete experiences as a permanent source of reflection. That forged, as we highlighted (2016), in a dialogical and horizontal way, since from this perspective there could be no ignorant or absolute wise, allowed the rural women workers in the public space of Sintraf Serrinha, to consolidate a perspective of collectivity amid solidarity, companionship and empowerment. And, by instituting dispute fields over rights denied since childhood, the rural workers perceived themselves in a society marked in an unusual way by droughts and as Lozano (2017) would say, due to precarious living conditions, mothers and other women submission images and the recurring recognition and appreciation of male figures.

This situation has changed significantly in recent decades and has rebelled. And, similar to strong women like Margarida Alves, they emerged in the fight against oppression/exploitation and for better living conditions for themselves and for the communities from which they originated. According to Franco (2018), Margarida Alves marked the recent history of the Brazilian peasantry. Because it demarcated a space of struggle in favor of the recognition and valorization of rural women workers as social, civil and political subjects in the private and

public spaces. Many others came on its mainstay and as her fell some. But many others resisted, showing that Margarida became a seed. And her flowering gave rise to a huge garden from which important fronts like the Marcha das Margaridas sprang up.

According to Moraes (2016), the marches gave visibility to the problems faced by farmers/family members, also enabling the construction of strategies to guarantee and consolidate rights, such as freedom and autonomy, equality and dignity. Through the marches, rural women workers experienced empowerment processes, fed back by social and political participation, which, according to Butto and Hora (2008), enabled the insertion in the formulation and implementation of public policies, at local, regional and/or national. One of the most expressive marches of rural people in Brazil was the *Grito da Terra*:<sup>4</sup>

After the struggle for women's membership [there was] the recognition of women as [...] agricultural professionals [...]. [In] ninety-four, [it was] the first trip to Brasília to participate in the first Grito da Terra Brasil and build [...] actions aimed at farmers [...] was a very big struggle to schedule an audience with the government, [which] did not want to talk [...] with the working class. We stayed there for a week, camped out front ... at Praça dos Três Poderes. And then, when it was time for a fight, the men didn't go, it was left to me. [...] I was the first person from Serrinha to go to Brasília. [...] then [...] there were several guidelines that we presented. (Sempreviva, 2020, s/p)<sup>5</sup>

Also inspired by collective actions/articulations, but exclusively by women such as the World March of Women,<sup>6</sup> underlined Franco (2018), the Marcha das Margaridas became the political act of greater visibility and national repercussion of rural women workers. Coordinated by the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG) and the Movement of Rural Women Workers of the Northeast (MMTR-NE), Franco (2018) pointed out, the Marcha das Margaridas was held for the first time in August 2000 in Brasília and brought as the issue on the political agenda themes such as hunger, poverty and sexist violence. Due to its profoundly political character, Franco (2018) pointed out, it entered the permanent agenda of activism/movements of farmers/rural workers. Its first edition was in 2003, maintaining a four-year periodicity: 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019.

Among the main achievements resulting from the Marcha das Margaridas, Butto and Hora (2008) underlined, the creation in 2003 of the Special Advisory of the Ministry of Agrarian Development/National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform, called Equality Promotion Program Gender, Race and Ethnicity (Ppigre / MDA). Advisory that started to act, according to Butto and Hora (2008), in the development of public policies to promote the economic rights of rural workers through actions to support production, access and guarantee the use of land, access to civil documentation and valuing participation and social control.

Hora and Butto (2014) also highlighted that in the subsequent period, from 2011 to 2013, the agenda for fighting poverty with the «Brasil Sem Miséria Plan» stood out. In addition to public policies, they have increasingly incorporated gender mainstreaming, with emphasis on the implementation of quotas for the assistance and application of specific resources for women, such as the Food Acquisition Program (PAA) and Public Calls for selection of Technical Assistance Service Providers (Ater). The set of these achievements revealed that the collective empowerment of rural women workers interfered in public policies. And, although with some limitations, such policies have come to approach the challenges and needs experienced by these women in the countryside.

However, in 2016 the virtuous cycle of conquests came to be haunted by the patriarchy that shaped a Brazilian landowning and slave society. At a time when, at the federal level, pointed out Veronezzi (2018), the breakdown of historical conquests began, which included those aimed at rural workers. With the overthrow of a democratically elected government without proof of illicit, highlighted Veronezzi (2018), conservative parties came to power instituting a government formed exclusively by men. The absence of women at the top of this government was only comparable to the government of General Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979), during the Military Dictatorship (1964-1985). According to Veronezzi (2018), setbacks advanced and male chauvinism and misogyny manifested themselves without any modesty in government speeches and policies. This process was radicalized with the election of a far-right president in 2018.

If the escalation of conservatism was shown to be intense through attacks that were deliberately committed to the weakening of the syndicates, the struggle of the workers proved stiffer. Once again, they gained the streets and collectively reorganized their strategies, honoring their historic struggle against oppression and for the maintenance of historically consolidated rights. A fact that confirmed Batliwala (1997) who thought that, in order to transform society, women's

empowerment has been transformed into a political force with a view to destabilizing/transforming existing power structures. Thus, Stromquist (1997) highlighted that the empowerment of female workers contributed to the questioning of power relations, both in interpersonal relationships and in the society institutions. Because, as Stromquist (1997) pointed out, the State traditionally interpreted the needs of women according to their own conveniences. It was necessary for the uprising of collectives such as those of rural women workers to happen so that the systematic invisibility of their agendas was broken.

And, although they have not been successful in all the battle flags, this participation was fundamental for the production of undoubtedly important knowledge, according to Baquero (2012), for political intervention in social reality. In order to get into the context of the processes initiated by the participation of women workers in Sintraf Serrinha in its educational and political developments, we will focus on the section that follows on the methodological foundations and on the analysis of the information collected in the field within the scope of this study.

## **METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS**

In looking at the this investigation phenomenon, we seek in the words of Macedo (2000), not only to break with the subject-object dichotomy, but to enter the world of irreducible experiences to ratio. Because of this, the qualitative approach was chosen, ethnographic inspiration research. This as a hermeneutical effort, as pointed out by Macedo (2000), involved in the construction of an understanding that, transcending manipulation and control, welcomed a phenomenon originating from the contradictions, impertinences and provisionality of the lived world.

We conducted the field research using the semi-structured interview as a mediating tool. With a pre-defined script, but sufficiently flexible, we seek, in the words of Filipak (2017), to house possible research insurgencies. We interviewed eight workers who had their identities preserved through pseudonyms chosen by themselves. In the analysis that follows, we carried out a sample clipping based on the statements of four of the eight women workers interviewed in the field research that gave rise to the doctoral thesis from which this article originated.

## **ANALYSIS OF INFORMATION**

The investigation singularities outlined in this article showed that its subject-object could never be approached in a generic way. This is because it brought with it an unmistakable identity reference, represented by rural workers from a place marked by authoritarian political practices and with family relationships crossed by a strong patriarchal trait - the Sisal Territory. Relationships where the confinement of women to the private space, the difficulty of communication and sociability were not uncommon: «[...] I was very closed. [...] The most I did with people was 'good morning', 'good afternoon'». <sup>7</sup>

Confined and almost always subject to invisibility, we highlight (2009), almost always faced a hard workday, focused on caring for the home, people and the garden. So, the participation conquest in the public space of Sintraf Serrinha represented an important rupture, about overcoming the limits between the domestic/private space and the political/public space: «From there, I started walk [in] 'other' communities, see what it was like to live from that community [...]». <sup>8</sup>

As an element resulting from the breaking of personal boundaries and also of the boundaries between the domestic/private and the public/political, participation in the syndicate movement was involved in raising awareness/empathy regarding the difficulties experienced by the walking companions: «[...] we become aware, [...] 'of friends', right? A lot that 'the friends' went through, when it wasn't unionized, when it wasn't aware [...]». <sup>9</sup> The transformative character of unionization was shown precisely because of the knowledge that they mobilized. Which constituted a differential, a transformative landmark in the lives of rural women workers.

Transformation that reached these women personal life, but it was not limited to it, showing that the individuality was strengthened in the collectivity. Hence the communal, solidary and political character of such an experience: «After we started to live together, to integrate [...] with each other, we started to have an objective. What does the other person live out there?». <sup>10</sup> Process that led to the taking of a political position regarding personal and collective self-recognition as an organized and subject category of rights:

[...] we went to the fight! [...] because social security for rural workers was approved [in] eighty-eight [...] and the rest [stayed] asleep in the drawers of government ministries [...]. <sup>11</sup>



The «going to fight» generated extremely relevant achievements at the national level and that needed to overcome the ministry bureaucracy such as the right to retirement of rural women and men workers. By insisting on the fight, the workers also achieved: «[...] the implantation of the right to maternity wages for rural women [...]».<sup>12</sup> This achievement was fundamental for the dignity of the farming mothers to be respected: «The woman would leave and stay at the house and with a month had to go to the fields, to work to survive, because she had nothing [...]».<sup>13</sup> Although the *Grito da Terra* was an important movement on the agenda of the Brazilian peasantry, it was through the *Marcha das Margaridas* that the feminist and sex/gender agenda gained greater visibility in the Brazilian peasantry, especially from the beginning of the twenty-first century. It was after the March that rural workers: «[...] started to have the right to make a rural credit project at the bank».<sup>14</sup> Achievement that, as we pointed out (2020), contributed to the rural women workers gain greater autonomy in the economic management of the activities developed in family farming. Not to mention achieving the right to land ownership:

[...] Because until some time ago, [the] land document had to be in the name of the 'man'. Today we have in Serrinha an average of forty-five to forty-eight percent of the properties [that] are in the name of women.<sup>15</sup>

Although the percentage of women workers reached slightly less than half of the tenure titles, this figure was extremely significant. In view of the historical gender inequality in relation to land tenure in our country and in general, in Latin America. This inequality, which, according to Deere and León (2002), arose from male preference in inheritance, marriage and state programs of land distribution. And that only started to be changed, according to Butto and Hora (2008), from the 1988 Constitution that instituted women's rights to land, regardless of civil status.

On the local scale, more specifically in the second decade of the 2000s, a hot topic on the agendas of rural women workers was 'the health issue': «Today what has most affected rural women's lives is the absence of a quality health care system [...]».<sup>16</sup> In terms of the guidelines related to the theme, a relevant achievement was the establishment of a: «[...] specific date of attendance only for rural areas at the Health Department. [...]».<sup>17</sup> However, the demand for care consistent with the needs of rural and urban women, especially pregnant women, took the rural workers to the streets: «[...] we were fighting for motherhood in Serrinha because many women

'were' losing their lives, children who were born and then died. [...]».<sup>18</sup> Even without being successful in this goal, as we highlighted (2020), they remained steadfast in the struggle:

[...] We have already had a public hearing at the City Council. [...] we present a proposal for the municipality's health [...] budget. Even for two thousand and twenty we already presented the proposal ... Amendment, right? [...]. We did not enter a popular amendment, because [...] it needed the signature of one third of the electorate in the municipality [...].<sup>19</sup>

In view of the amendment impossibility, another strategy was launched: «[...] we entered through a councilor who speaks our language a little, right? But we went there and that, approved it in the Chamber. I don't know if [...] it will be executed».<sup>20</sup> Due to the doubt as to the capacity of the public power to accommodate this important claim, we emphasize (2020), that rural workers resorted to an alternative solution: «[the] construction of a space within the Municipal Hospital, [with] an area exclusive for maternity. [and] an attachment [...] to take care of the part ... more of the women [...]».<sup>21</sup>

The struggle for an exclusive hospital for the care of women in the countryside and in the city, among many other fights undertaken by women workers, revealed the challenges for implementing public policies with a feminist and sex/gender bias. Challenges that have intensified in the last four years due to the rise of the extreme right to power in Brazil and the dismantling of public policies and rights historically consolidated by reforms such as the social security:

[...] we focused on basic work [...] to talk about the pension reform issue. That in fact [...] aggravates the [...] issue of women, right? Considering the whole context, women suffer the most. [Yeah] there are a lot of questions about political games [...].<sup>22</sup>

The forces enlistment was necessary considering this scenario guided by the ideals of sectors for which the struggle of women workers did not matter. For these sectors, what really mattered were 'political games' in their complex interfaces with economic games. Interfaces which are

almost always harmful to the most socially vulnerable groups. Here the relevance of participation became evident as a process that, in its educational dimension, made possible the emergence of knowledge inevitably implicated in the empowerment of women workers who discovered themselves as subjects of historical struggles within the scope of the feminist and sex/gender agenda in the field.

## **CONCLUSIVE CONSIDERATIONS**

The participation of rural women workers in the public space represented by Sintraf Serrinha revealed the role of activism/ social movements of rural workers/family farmers in changing the government's agenda regarding the inclusion of historical rights such as retirement, maternity wages, land ownership and access to credit.

In fact, for farmers / rural workers, participation in the public space of Sintraf Serrinha represented an important rupture: overcoming the limits between the domestic/private space and the political/public space. The transformative character of unionization was shown precisely because of the knowledge it mobilized.

Such struggles revealed the challenges for implementing public policies with a feminist and sex/gender bias. Challenges that have been intensified in the last four years due to the rise of the extreme right in Brazil. This fact confirmed the need for rural women and men workers to remain vigilant and in the fight against the threat posed by the dismantling of historically consolidated public policies.

The enlistment of forces was necessary considering the scenario guided by the ideas of conservative sectors for which the struggle of women workers did not matter. The commitment of these women to the confrontations in favor of public policies aimed at the feminist and sex/gender agenda demonstrated that the knowledge and the consequent empowerment achieved by them had as a horizon the consolidation of societal models guided by solidarity, equity and democratic substantiality.

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## **Notas aclaratorias**

<sup>1</sup> According to Telma Nascimento (2009), the Union of Rural Workers and Family Farmers of Serrinha-Ba (Sintraf), former Union of Rural Workers (STR), was founded on January 7, 1968, recognized by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security on May 7, 1969. From its founding until the end of the 1980s, it was under the control of employer power. Concerned about this situation, however, a group of male and female workers constituted a slate that, elected in 1992, created the necessary conditions for the break with the control of the employer power; taking the management of the union for the workers.

<sup>2</sup> According to Humberto Nascimento (2003), the Territory of Sisal received this name because it emerged state and nationally as an important sisal producer pole. Leadership that resulted from easy adaptation to the climatic and geological characteristics of the region. Agave sisalana, a species originally from Central America, arrived in the region in 1910, more precisely in the municipality of Santa Luz, from where it expanded to approximately 15 more municipalities. Its commercial planting contributed to intensify the population of the northeastern and central north of the State of Bahia.

<sup>3</sup> Mobilized in the field through the Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEB's), Popular Education, according to Nóbrega (1988), consolidated the construction of knowledge mediated by dialogical and problematizing methodology. According to Ramos and Antônio Nascimento (2001), in the 1980s the CEB's contributed decisively to the creation of the Community Organization Movement (MOC). Which as we pointed out (2009), made it possible the women rural workers sharing of knowledge and learning, intervention forms, survival and coexistence with the socio-biodiversity of the Sisal Territory.

<sup>4</sup> According to the National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (2020), O Grito da Terra is the main event on the agenda of the rural union movement and has been bringing together since 1995 thousands of rural workers from all over the country in Brasília to claim agendas related to agricultural policies; land reform; compliance with labor laws; among others.

<sup>5</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>6</sup> According to the feminist organization Sempre Viva (2020), the World March of Women resulted from a demonstration held in 1995 in Quebec, Canada, where 850 women marched for more rights for women. At the end of this action, several achievements were made. Quebec women sought contacts with organizations in several countries to share this experience and present the proposal to create a global campaign for women.

<sup>7</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Genolina, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 09.12.2019.

<sup>8</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Genolina, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 09.12.2019.

<sup>9</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Jovina, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 05.12.2019.

<sup>10</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Jovina, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 05.12.2019.

<sup>11</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>12</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>13</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>14</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>15</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>16</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>17</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Genolina, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 09.12.2019.

<sup>18</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Genolina, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 09.12.2019.

<sup>19</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>20</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>21</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Fátima, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 10.12.2019.

<sup>22</sup> Interview given by a worker, who used the pseudonym of Genolina, Telma Regina Batista Nascimento at the headquarters of Sintraf Serrinha on 09.12.2019.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.