

# Chapter 8


## Women Empowering Women: Solidarity Economy and Feminine Autonomy in Araraquara, Brazil

**Julia da Silva Gutierrez Ruiz**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6930-8765>

*State University of São Paulo, Brazil*

**Josine Michelle Wolters**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8632-1063>

*HSE University, Russia*

**Magdalena A. Gaete-Sepulveda**

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4786-9374>

*HSE University, Russia*

**Leandro Pereira Morais**

*State University of São Paulo, Brazil*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the transformative effects of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) on women in Araraquara, a city known for its grassroots activism and social innovation. By focusing on women who have been marginalized economically and socially. The study explores how the SSE provides a path to agency and self-determination. The research highlights the creation of sustainable women-led enterprises in Brazil that foster not only economic independence but also personal growth and collective empowerment. This participation allows women to gain greater control over their labor, income, and decision-making, which in turn promotes feminine autonomy. The analysis goes beyond economic outcomes to investigate the*

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*broader social and personal transformations resulting from women's leadership in the SSE. Using qualitative data from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, the study provides a detailed understanding of the challenges and successes experienced by women shaping their own futures through these initiatives.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Brazil, as part of the Global South, provides a critical setting in which debates on women's empowerment and autonomy remain both urgent and highly relevant. Economically, Brazilian women face disproportionate challenges, as they are more likely to experience unemployment, underemployment, and labor market inequality, often in precarious forms of work (Ruiz & Morais, 2024; Hirata, 2018). In 2019, women's average remuneration was approximately 33% lower than men's, while Black women earned significantly less than their white counterparts, underscoring the persistence of sexism and racism in Brazilian society (Ruiz, 2024).

Within this context, the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has emerged as a meaningful response to the challenges of precariousness and exclusion. Rooted in values of cooperation, inclusion, and self-management, SSE initiatives offer an alternative model that promotes social transformation while addressing structural inequalities. The economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, characterized by stagnation and hyperinflation, provided fertile ground for the growth of these initiatives as strategies for generating employment and income (Chaves-Avila & Gallego-Bono, 2020). This trajectory aligns with findings in feminist economics, which show that women's vulnerability is closely tied to structural disparities in access to care, capital, and equitable participation in segmented labor markets (Benería, 2003; Kabeer, 2011, 2015).

It is precisely at the intersection of systemic vulnerability and the emergence of empowering alternatives that this chapter situates its analysis. The focus on Araraquara—a city recognized as a hub for grassroots activism and social innovation—provides an opportunity to examine the concrete impacts of the SSE on women who have historically been excluded from economic and social participation (Garcia, 2025). These women often navigate overlapping barriers of gender bias, racial discrimination, and economic precarity (Bonini et al., 2025), yet within SSE initiatives, they encounter pathways to agency and self-determination. For many, this translates into enterprises that are not only economically sustainable but also create environments conducive to personal growth, collective empowerment, and enhanced well-being (Ellul & Friggieri, 2025). Through their participation, women

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