

Abstract 1 (Oral Presentation) Sub-Theme 6: Pastoralism, Social, Gender and Policy Issues

Social justice, gender and equity issues in rangelands/grasslands.

Title: The Role of Women in Rural Livestock: Which Women? Which Livestock?

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We explore the conceptual and empirical limitations of the question about “the role of women in rural livestock production” as well as the widespread assumption that women in livestock are subsistence or smallholder farmers. While this is correct in many situations, “essentialist” development discourses often disregard new demographic trends and the heterogeneity of livestock production systems. Our research, which focuses on the livelihoods of women involved with livestock production in the Pampas’ grasslands of Brazil, proposes: 1) to critically analyse some of the most widely spread assumptions about women involved in beef livestock production, including the belief that women are naturally protective of the environment, or that they need to be “empowered” through the assignment of even more functions (workload) to thrive, and 2) to identify some of the common traits that our studied women do, in fact, share. Through a mixed-methods approach combining a literature review with in-depth interviews and participant observation, we dismantled some myths while confirming other common traits (only valid to the cases studied). Shared traits are more related to what women *do* under certain circumstances (family situation, division of labour, etc.) than to what women *are* by definition and include the responsible use of credit lines; the positive cost-benefit equation of respecting women’s right to own land and cattle and to make their own productive decisions; the demographic contribution of rural women as a response to the increasing masculinisation and ageing of the rural population in the Pampas; the importance of supporting sustainable livestock production strategies vis-à-vis the dramatic land use and climate changes impacting the region, and the fact that women, in spite of many advancements, only take the lead when there is no father, husband or brother around to dispute power.

Keywords: Women, Livestock, Gender Myths, Brazil

Introduction

The gendered nature of women involved in livestock production, local and traditional knowledge and their transmission; resource access and ownership, management; livestock ownership and production systems; power asymmetries, motivations, goals and values; training and technical assistance, and relation with the environment, are still largely unexplored, with some interesting exceptions (see for example Galie et al., 2018). In that regard, this article seeks to contribute filling these gaps by exploring some of the main conceptual and empirical limitations of the question about “the role of women in rural livestock production”, as well as the widespread assumption that women in livestock are subsistence or smallholder farmers.

Our point of departure is that, while this is correct in many situations, any “essentialist” development discourse often disregards new demographic trends and the heterogeneity of livestock production systems, especially in South America. Ignoring the diversity and cultural richness of livestock systems – a strategy frequently fostered by plant-based companies’ lobbies or even by well-intentioned development agencies— puts livelihoods’ sustainability at stake, threatening the food security of countries in development from all over the world. This inattention to gendered dynamics, and to women’s roles in livestock in particular, comes at a time when many pastoral social-ecological systems are approaching potential linked cultural-ecological tipping points, which could lead to the extinction of some systems, and the transformation of others. Despite having significantly increased their presence in recent years, women in the Southern rangelands who practice commercial livestock as heads of the production unit remain virtually invisible, putting at stake the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals 2 (zero hunger) and 5 (gender equality). Already a decade ago, a comparative study of the official statistics on women and beef livestock production available in Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay (Litre, 2010) confirmed for example that survey questions frequently replicate reductionist visions of women in the sector. Examples include referring to women in livestock as synonymous with subsistence farmers or smallholders, and / or by prioritising gendered expressions which do not exist in English, such as the term “*productores*” (producers in masculine, in Portuguese and Spanish).

It is true that the situation is being gradually reversed: while bovine beef production was until recently seen as an almost exclusively male, “Gaicho” activity, Uruguay implemented in 2016 (MGAP, 2018) a sample-based Livestock Survey which explored the role of women as livestock production chiefs of unit, their age, land tenure status and their formal education level. This is a huge step towards taking women out of the shadow of the male member of the family, be it their fathers, husbands, brothers or assistants. In Argentina, the 2018 National Agricultural Census’ (INDEC, 2018) preliminary results still focus on rural women as a single, indistinct category. In spite of this methodological blindness, some initial data show that the number of women who lead production units has doubled in recent years, reaching 20% of total owners - a reality similar to the Agricultural Census 2017 (IBGE, 2017) recently presented in neighbouring Brazil. In none of the three countries do national statistics routinely combine demographic data on women (age, formal education, marital status, land tenure, productive activity) with specific information about production units, such as herd management and trade strategies, environmental concerns, goals, values, rural extension and information access. Such a specific gendered analysis of livestock production may sometimes be made available if formally requested to official agencies, but processes are slow and often based on the good will of public servants. On the other hand, qualitative research on women and livestock are more abundant in the study regions, focusing more on what women *do* under certain circumstances (family situation, available resources, division of labour, etc.) than on what they *are* as relevant social and economic actors. Such studies include the responsible use of credit lines; the positive cost-benefit equation of respecting women’s right to own land and cattle and to make their own productive decisions. They also analyse the demographic contribution of rural women as a response to the increasing masculinisation and ageing of the rural population in the Pampas; the importance of supporting sustainable livestock production strategies vis-à-vis the dramatic land use and climate changes impacting the region, and the fact that women, in spite of advancements, only take the lead when there are no men around. Through a mixed-methods approach combining a literature review with in-depth interviews along with participatory approaches involving a variety of actors from different backgrounds, we sought to dismantle some myths while confirming other common traits.

Gender and Women's Studies in Brazil

The social sciences are faced with the insufficiency of theoretical frameworks in the face of a complex emerging reality; theories, models and even paradigms need to be revisited and questioned. According to Robert Connel (1985), gender studies have promoted the most important change in Western social thought since the studies of class and socio-economic structures carried out in the 19th century. The emergence of new actors allows the identification of new forms of oppression that go beyond production relations and reach transclassist social groups located beyond national borders. These new social practices present issues little known to the social sciences and the institutionalisation of the search for answers that signal new conceptual and methodological paths constitute the conditions for the emergence, formation and functioning of new fields of knowledge (Foucault, 2005a; Silva, 2000).

As stated by Machado, "the emergence of a field [...] defined by privileging women's studies, studies on the social relations of sex or gender, is recent and indebted to feminist and social movements. 'Women's liberation' (movements) of the seventies", are movements that, when introducing new perspectives and questions, claim an innovative character in face of the tradition of disciplinary knowledge" (Machado, 1994: 2). The feminist movement, when elaborating the criticism to the construction of a sexual category of women based on a masculine knowledge that is still dominant and therefore has privileged access to the idea of neutrality in the formation of constituted knowledge, denounces the need to constitute a new theoretical and methodological look, thus promoting the creation of its own spaces, as is the case with the creation of feminist magazines of a primarily theoretical character and the constitution of feminist research groups, allowing the formation of this new intellectual field (Nogueira, 2009).

Machado (1994) points out that if, on the one hand, the feminist movement somehow lost part of the dynamism that existed in the seventies, on the other, it still constitutes a forging element in the intellectual field that includes gender, social sex or women's studies. It is necessary to emphasise the different degrees of legitimacy and institutionalisation, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, attributed to each of these categories. In that sense, the author highlights the need to recognise the dispute between 'polar positions in orthodox research' and the 'militant' stance for a legitimate monopoly in the production of totalising truths that encompass the specificities of the reality of women and that at the same time are universal.

Machado (1994) analyses the configuration of Brazilian women's studies from the perspective of the dialogue between the French and American fields and their different approaches to issues such as alterity, subjectivity and universality, relating them "in the broader context of the modalities of political use of the ideas of equality and difference and their immersion in a network of symbolic signifiers, diversely constituted" in each of the referred national contexts (1994: 8). As it happens with women's and gender studies, in order to understand the heterogeneity of women involved in livestock, there is a need to contextualise and differentiate the different definitions of livestock production, as presented by many development agencies. The expressions of what "livestock" is should not be polarised or be taken as synonyms of only environmentally-friendly subsistence farmers, neither of exclusively large-scale beef producers (and deforesters).

Women in Livestock: Which Women? Which Livestock?

Drawing lessons from the Livestock Fact Check Project, Salmon et al. (2019) contribute to inform discussions about livestock production through a balanced examination of some commonly referenced livestock 'facts'. The project's key findings are useful to anyone engaged in discussions about livestock and society. The authors conclude that the activity is as rich and complex as the people who practice it, the herd that is dealt with, the territory where the activity is practiced. Describing the different livelihoods and ways of relating to the activity (and speaking about "livestocks", in plural, is already important, especially to give visibility to the topic. However, we need to go beyond the description of case studies: it is necessary to reflect on the connecting threads between such dissimilar realities. A first step in this direction would be to provide answers to the following question: are decision makers facing the issue of female livestock(s), especially with a view to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, in realistic way, or are we perpetuating gender-related myths and stereotypes that mobilise but, at the same time, limit and cut out much more complex and subtle realities, which go beyond gender distinctions in livestock production? Are productive logics the same when raising cows, camels, sheep or chicken? Are the demands for labor and physical effort the same? The generated income? The margin for investment and long-term planning? The territories in which livestock systems are operating are also vital: are they near or far from urban areas, health access and schools? Are they located in natural grasslands? Basaltic soils? Deserts? Are there any nearby water sources? Is it rained or irrigated livestock production? Does the region suffer from extreme climate events and climate uncertainty? Is meat traded within the region, the country, abroad? What are the sanitary standards?

Regarding the women who are involved in livestock production, the results of our decade of field studies in the Pampas of the Southern Cone shows that they are as many situations as women. Do they hold religious values? How do they impact in their economic choices and production modes? What family structures are privileged in the community? In some regions of India, a woman with a male child is more respected than a woman without a child or with a female daughter, and this impacts in her expected role in the productive system. Women who live with her in-laws frequently have less power to choose. In the Amazon region, women are frequently entitled to land, but many still do not any personal identification documentation proving it. At the same time, it is worth questioning, along with Cornwall et al. 2007 and Cornwall et al. 2009, the expression "myth" itself: are myths always bad? According to the authors, no: myths and narratives can encourage action, also among development agencies.

The problem is when a slogan created to mobilize resources for a given action ends up creating stereotypes or missing the goal of a transformative policy. In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, especially with regard to SDG 5 (gender), describing these myths and their impact on decision making is relevant. Together with Cornwall et al, (2007), we may wonder whether it is correct to relate the following human qualities to "essentially feminine qualities": i) "Taking care of children / not abandoning children"; ii) "take care of nature"; iii) "Be peaceful", iv) "Be more supportive", v) "Be more resilient to pain"; vi) "Be more detail oriented", vii) "Being more careful, of children, animals, nature, is part of your being mothers"?, viii) "Be more economical / save more than men", ix) "Be victims"; x) "Be heroines", and xi) "Be less corrupt and have more moral values".

Regarding women being defined as "caregivers" (children, cattle, nature, the environment), Leach (2007, p. 70) already demonstrated that women are not "essentially" caregivers or protectors, nor do they have an exclusive link with nature, as formulated by "ecofeminism". Gender and development narratives also present women as heroines in their fighting skills, in their resilience to withstand gender disadvantages and to fight for their autonomy. It is clear that

women have needed heroic attitudes to claim rights that, historically and culturally, have been denied them: the right to vote, the right to decent working conditions, the right to study careers considered masculine, among many other fields, only they were made possible by a constant affirmation of his selflessness and his heroism built over generations. As Ortega I Gasset said: man (and women) are themselves and their circumstances. Thus, in the end, women are neither more nor less than human beings who face circumstances. Thus, it is the circumstances that have punished, limited, stigmatised and subjugated women that have transformed them into heroines, in many cases. In the face of unfavourable circumstances for his free will, there are women who are resilient (they remain the same), others adapt (change essentially to survive), others succumb. In the same way as male people.

In the same way, the stereotype often presented about women as weakened victims is also not fair with reality. Yes, many are clear and evident victims of the lack of opportunities for women who decide to be dedicated mothers and dedicated professionals, of the triple workday, of male oppression and violence, of prejudice, of the abuse of power, even of the fear of some men in losing historical "rights" that, in fact, were only conquests based on the use of the gallows, rarely on merit. There is an increasing number of papers on the relationship between women and corruption. Often, as Goertz (2007) reminds us, women are seen as less corrupt and have more moral values than men (Goetz, 2007, p. 90 and 95). Recent studies point out that, in fact, the link between corruption and gender does not include essential characteristics of what it would be like to be a woman or a man, but opportunities. In other words, positions of political and economic leadership have historically been restricted to the male gender. Or as the chorus says: "The occasion makes the thief". These studies show that women are not, when placed in positions of political and / or economic leadership, any more, but also no less, corrupt than men. And what about women being more supportive among them? There are clearly matriarchal families, and matriarchal societies. Often adversity unites, and women have historically faced adversity collectively (just like men, said to be in step). For example, there are animal species with non-traditional roles, such as male penguins that care for their young in their belly feathers. The reality indicates that women are not "naturally" more inclined to be supportive than men. Even in some cases, interviews reveal that the origin of some of their problems would arise from the rivalry between women themselves, and not necessarily from men.

The issue is, the definition we give to things and situations is the basis of our action. This is especially relevant in the field of development and the search for rural female protagonism. As we saw above, we are not denying that these qualities are characteristic of many women. On the contrary, they are frequent. However, we ask ourselves how much of these qualities are essential (inherent to the biological sex of being a woman), and how much of a cultural one (roles learned or assigned by society) do these qualities have? ". For example, the gentle modern man "helps" the woman, who essentially must be a mother, mother and caregiver. But the essential responsibility (again underlined) of raising children is a woman's task. On the other hand: just as traditionally women have been assigned roles, and strong expectations about what it means to be a "good woman", today men suffer from feeling that certain qualities are attributed exclusively to the field of "feminine" ("essentialism"). Thus, by "essentializing" these qualities, many men, especially younger ones, are being deprived of the same right to be dedicated parents, to have good taste, to cry and be sensitive, to care, to embrace, to be supportive, to express feelings without appearing feminized or vulnerable.

Conclusion

Our article sought to critically analyse some of the most widely spread assumptions about women involved in beef livestock production in the Brazilian grasslands, including the belief that women are naturally protective of the environment, or that they need to be “empowered” through the assignment of even more functions (workload) to thrive. It also illustrated some of the common traits that our studied women do, in fact, share and contributed to highlight the need to generate more accessible, disaggregated and user-friendly statistical data on women and livestock. Our work also pointed out to the urgency of better generated more evidence-based policies improving women livelihoods, economic empowerment and personal fulfilment in a more sustainable and equitable world. We recommend to overcome gender insensitive research methods and theoretical frameworks and to generate more accessible, disaggregated and user-friendly statistical data providing a more appropriate picture of the rich diversity of women in livestock production. Only then we will be able to better inform evidence-based policies improving women livelihoods, economic empowerment and personal fulfilment in a more sustainable and equitable world.

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