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Sustainable Development and the Transformation of Female Rural Labor: The Case of Woman Cattle Ranchers in Uruguay

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Sustainable development and the transformation of female rural labor: The case of woman cattle ranchers in Uruguay

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Key words: women's work; rural development; livestock farming; Uruguay; gender and ranching

Abstract

Internationally, rural women are considered key to sustainable development. However, in the Uruguayan livestock sector, women's work is largely unrecognized by public policy makers, causing younger women to migrate, and resulting in the "masculinization" of livestock husbandry. In Uruguay, extensive livestock production (range livestock) analysis has historically ignored the genuinely productive role that women play in rangelands, limiting the visibility of their action to reproductive activities while ignoring their importance in terms of income generation, herd management, networking, strategic planning, etc. Although family production integrates women, their work is often invisible, subsumed within domestic chores or seen as "helping" the husband, considering him the only "producer." This paper reflects on the role of women in the organization of labor in extensive livestock systems while providing elements to elucidate the relationship between gender and livestock production strategies. Through the implementation of semi-structured interviews and participant observation dynamics, we analyzed the productive practices of women dedicated to cattle ranching in the Northern littoral ("Litoral Norte") grasslands of Uruguay. Our analysis focused on three main areas: i) a typology of the main identified profiles of rural women involved in livestock production (principal decision-maker, collaborator, job executor) and farm and time management options; ii) the different dynamics of decision-making, according to the previously cited typology of women's profiles and roles; and iii) women's subjective perceptions and visions of the transformations experienced in their productive activities. Results reveal the relative heterogeneity of female work configurations in family livestock production systems. Main labor differences evidenced in the production unit are rooted in deeper structural inequalities originated in the traditional place's women are assigned in the Uruguayan society at large. In that regard, our research identified five factors that influence the position, profile, and labor roles of women in extensive livestock production in Uruguay: i) the symbolic power position and relationship of women with and within their families, ii) their socioeconomic background, iii) the relative size of their farms in number of hectares, iv) the presence of labor support/employees, and v) the formal tenure of land and animals. We conclude that the rich diversity of women's involvement strategies in ranching is linked to a delicate articulation between their families, their professional and their social universes (including their expectations for the future), all of which offer women a span of different degrees of autonomy to determine their time management, the performance of productive tasks, and their own identities.

Introduction

In Uruguay, the women who lived in productive units in 2011 were 39,257 out of a total of 106,961 people. Between 1970 and 2011, the proportion of women in the total population decrease from 43.4 to 36.7% (MGAP-DIEA, 2011). This evolution shows that historically women have had a lesser presence than men in the field, due in part to the country's predominant production system, extensive cattle ranching, which has traditionally almost exclusively involved men. On the other hand, since the fifties, the processes of land concentration and mechanization, have reduced family production (Rossi, 2010), in which women had a prevalent place. The statistics reflect the gender inequalities women experience in Uruguayan agriculture. The statistics also obscure the work that many women carry out on farms as unpaid workers. Consequently, the rural environment is experiencing a sustained process of depopulation, due in part to women's emigration to urban areas, especially young women who seek to continue with their studies and obtain job opportunities (Chiappe, 2005).

Does rural women's work count?

Economics and sociology traditionally consider work to be activities related to the economic production of goods and services that fall within the market circuit. Within the population of rural women, three sub-populations can be differentiated: agricultural producers (heads and co-heads of farms), wage earners (permanent or temporary), and women with non-agricultural rural employment (FAO, 2013). This leads many studies on gender and rural work to ignore that the boundaries that separate these sub-populations are by no means hermetic, since rural women are essentially multi-active, combining, simultaneously or successively, wage-earning, or unpaid agricultural activities, with non-agricultural activities under different conditions. Likewise, rural women shift very easily from being active to inactive¹ (or vice versa) in livestock activity, depending on family circumstances or the environment, a fact often overlooked by research (Courdin, 2008). This mobility and multi-belonging to different categories strongly hinders women's visibility and characterization, giving rise to hugely different figures, not very comparable and, generally, very underestimated (FAO, 2013).

Methodology

Based on semi-structured interviews with 13 rural women from the North Coast region of the country, who present profiles of principal decision-maker, collaborator, observer, we sought to identify the different degrees of involvement of women in livestock production families. Principal decision-maker: woman who make decisions related to the operation of the production system and the management of the farm. Collaborator: woman who collaborate in decision making with the boss. Observer: woman who do not participate in decision making. These profiles, commonly perceived in rural livestock areas of the country, were taken from previous studies (Courdin, 2008; Litre, 2010). We also investigated women's perceptions of their roles and the changes in gender relations in Uruguayan livestock production. We identified initial interviewees fitting the three profiles with assistance from Extension technicians and selected subsequent participants using the snowball method (Atkinson and Flint, 2004). From the analysis of the discourse of each of the interviews, we identified categories and indicators that allowed us to describe the type and level of involvement of women in the productive units. We also characterized their organization of work, identifying the factors that affect their roles, and deepening knowledge of their realities.

Results

The main practices developed by women in livestock production units can be organized into three categories: a) related to the functioning of the production system, b) linked to the management of the farm, and c) concerning the functioning of the home and family. The three groups contribute to the generation of direct income and to the reproduction of the family-farm unit. Work with animals in pens and field trips emerge as the main tasks within the first category. In the second, accounting and record-taking are the main tasks. The last category includes reproductive activities. Depending on the identified profiles of women and the degrees of involvement in the activities, we differentiated three types of women.

Women leaders: principal decision-maker of livestock operation

Women leaders are responsible for the productive unit and involved in the tasks that are carried out there. They are generally single or widowed, without dependent children, and who have acceded to the leadership of the productive unit due to their social condition (inheritance, widowhood, etc.). However, women maintain that the occupation of these spaces has been by choice, given their taste for rural activity, and not by imposition. At the national level (MGAP-DIEA, 2018), women who oversee livestock farms are 24% of all farms.

For the operation of the system, they have salaried labor (always male), to facilitate daily work, especially in tasks that require physical effort such as handling animals, maintaining fences, using heavy tools, etc. This does not imply a decrease in the participation of women in daily work, but rather they assume responsibility for planning work, generating authority when giving orders and legitimizing their decisions when managing the productive unit. Some of these women have experienced difficulties in their

¹ The inactivity of women in livestock activity refers to the relegation of their involvement in work within the activity as a result of the birth of a child, the illness of a family member, etc.

relationships with staff due to the “machismo” in rural areas, which positions the woman as incapable of leading decision-making spaces (Courdin, 2008).

Women “heads” are exclusively responsible for the decision-making process. However, there are some differences in the procedures of economic and productive decisions. Most of the economic decisions are made individually, reflecting the independence and personal freedom of these women regarding the management of their income. In contrast, productive decisions are made at two levels: i) through informal dialogue: with a close relative, with the permanent wage earner or with a neighbor who is considered a mentor due to experience in the activity; and/or ii) through a formal dialogue with a professional belonging to an agricultural extension entity. The predominant level is the first (informal dialogue), since it allows them to easily channel some affective or aesthetic criteria (such as the choice of breed, the selection of animals, etc.) that are sometimes questioned by professionals.

One of the characteristics that differentiates women leaders and is typical of the profile is having a flexible and open attitude to new information. This means that women heads of production units are prone to “listen” to professionals, more predisposed to changes in their decisions regarding the operation of the production system and the incorporation of techniques and technologies that, in their opinion, allow them to improve their operations. Their interest in continuous learning and productive challenges lead them to participate in training activities, technical workshops and to receive extension workers in their productive unit. The relationship these women establish with technicians constitutes a learning process for both parties, being for these women an opportunity to demonstrate a different way of producing and for the professionals to understand a new sociocultural conception of managing a productive unit.

Shared work: collaborator of exploitation

Women "co-heads" share the productive unit with their partners and children. The presence of the man within the productive unit leads to these women not being able to play a leadership role ("heads") and being conditioned to share leadership with him.

The main difference with the previous group does not lie in the task's co-head women carry out, but in how they carry them out. Regarding productive activities, these women are involved in tasks carried out close to the domestic sphere, as a strategy not to neglect family dynamics, especially when they have children. They participate in activities with animals carried out in pens (health care, handling operations, etc.), their presence being less in field trips. Although these women's role is to collaborate and they are not essential for work, many participate actively in the work sharing equal conditions with their partners (in terms of the amount of work and the importance attributed to it for both genders). This low appreciation attributed to women may be due to the fears they face daily within the family and in society, of occupying, sometimes, levels higher than men (Niedworok, 1986).

The "co-bosses" who are more involved with the operation of the production unit actively participate in tasks related to management, such as accounting and record-taking. This type of activity within the domestic sphere is compatible with other household activities and allows women to develop as responsible persons. Managing numbers, records and technical information requires “skills” that are more present in women, as they have a higher degree of educational training than men (MGAP-DIEA, 2018), which makes the task easier for them.

These co-head women's participation in relevant farm management activities increases their self-esteem given the greater visibility and recognition of their work, which, although it is usually seen as helping male work, in some cases is perceived as a partnership. Likewise, in the decision-making process, it positions them in a negotiation space that allows them to exchange opinions in a more fluid dialogue regarding the administrative and sometimes animal management decisions. Despite this, not all of them actively participate in this process, since they consider that the one who should have the “last word” is the head of the operation. This is the product of a socialization process, where women incorporate certain guidelines, codes and social norms that position them in subordination to the “boss”, who is a man (Jelin, 2010).

In this group of women, reproductive work, with very few exceptions, is exclusively female. This differential distribution of tasks is associated with the sociocultural conceptions that families have, where the man is responsible for productive work, defined as that of a social and collective nature that generates social wealth, while the woman is responsible for care of children and the home, reproductive work (Courdin *et al.*, 2014). This gender division of tasks has contributed to the fact that women “co-bosses” continue to be seen as “help” in productive tasks and as responsible for reproductive tasks, socially conditioning their independence and personal freedom.

Distant: observer on the operation

The “observer” women live with their families on farms. These women are involved little with the operation of the farm, not participating in any of the tasks of the production system. The tasks they perform have to do with taking care of the garden and small animals for the family's own consumption. Their low participation is due to the lack of interest and/or the absence of space to participate in the activities of the productive unit. This reflects the strong patriarchal role of the men who accompany them, and the low value that they attribute to women in rural tasks (Barthez, 2005).

The “observer” women define themselves as shy, reserved, and consider that their minimal formal education conditions them not to express opinions on the productive unit. Likewise, their role only in domestic activities based on their concern for the care of the family and the home inhibits personal development, which under the patriarchal vision that conceptualizes women as “housewives”, hinders their empowerment and restricts their autonomy, decision-making capacity, self-confidence, and security. These subjective evaluations of work not only account for myths and beliefs based on a pattern of traditional gender roles in the field, but also respond to an objective reality base due to social stereotypes.

Home, Family and Farm: A Crossroads

In contrast to the productive activities of the farm, reproductive activities, in addition to being carried out almost exclusively by the women of the three profiles studied, continue to be their responsibility. The collaboration of men in child-rearing and house-keeping activities is very low and occasional (when the woman is ill, etc.), although women increase their working hours in tasks related to livestock operation. The double working hours of women forces them to adjust the time to their multiple responsibilities. For this, some women have used various family strategies to be able to continue integrated into the work of the productive unit. These strategies allow women to combine the care and education of their children with the farm work, which naturally leads to situations in which women encourage the continuation of the operation across generations.

Conclusions

In addition to categorizing women's roles on livestock farms as principal decision-maker, collaborator, observer, this study reflects that the category of "collaborator" is the most frequent. However, in agricultural statistics, the importance of the collaborator role is almost nil. We see two potential explanations for this. First, is the lack of specific questions in the agricultural censuses regarding the contribution that women make to the economic development of farms. Second, the lack of awareness that women have the same rights with respect to men.

The specifics of livestock farming reveal key aspects of women's work. First, the overlapping of the productive and reproductive spheres make it difficult to distinguish the activities that women carry out in both spaces, which makes it difficult for their families and society in general to recognize their productive role. Second, a system of values and androcentric culture relegates women in the participation of work and decision-making. However, several women developed strategies (work and family coordination) that allow them to be involved in livestock tasks, demonstrating their skills for rural work and farm performance. Others prefer to develop in areas in which men do not show exclusive ability, such as farm business accounting, which gives them the opportunity to be involved with the operation and management of the operation, and thus obtain decision power.

Changes in the organization of work occur slowly. One challenge is that the dual role of family member/caregiver and farm worker makes it difficult for women to obtain remuneration for their participation in work. Additionally, the isolated conditions of the rural environment do not facilitate interaction with other women, which would provide validation/affirmation of their work and increased self-esteem.

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