



The women who feed us: Gender empowerment (or lack thereof) in rural Southern Brazil



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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on understanding the question: what do recent studies on the modernization of Brazilian agriculture tell us about the changes in gender dynamics as a traditional family farm moves to alternative strategies for reproduction and how do these respective roles empower or disempower women? To understand this issue, this article determines what kinds of roles women occupy in traditional family farms, as well as the urban roles they take on after the phenomenon of pluriactivity manifests, and evaluates these roles in an empowerment index. The analysis shows that the family farm is the least empowering option of the strategies I identified (and urban migration the most empowering), and that we can seek to emulate the empowering qualities of urban employment within family farms to maximize their future empowerment. A possible pathway to empowering women on family farms includes feminist support for the institutionalization of programs that make gender dynamics more equal within family farms.

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1. Introduction

Commercial and corporate agriculture has had an immense impact on displacing family farmers worldwide, a reality from which Brazilian farmers are not exempt. However, the impacts of the spread of commercial agriculture on women's empowerment within a patriarchal society such as Brazil are unclear and require further analysis. This article focuses on understanding the question: what do recent studies on the modernization of Brazilian agriculture tell us about the changes in gender dynamics as a traditional family farm moves to alternative strategies for reproduction and how do these respective roles empower or disempower women?

To understand this issue, I reviewed the existing literature to determine what kinds of roles women occupy within traditional family farms, and then identified some urban roles they may take on after the phenomenon of pluriactivity manifests, evaluating these roles in an empowerment index. I focused my research only on the South of Brazil, so that I could concentrate on the specific agrarian situation of a region within a gender-unequal developing

country. The South of Brazil is a valuable case to study in determining the effects of modern agriculture on the family farm in the developing world, since this region has seen some of the largest transformations to agriculture in Brazil.

My research question relies on the belief that the empowerment of rural women in developing countries is an important issue to study and take action for. This belief has been reinforced by several organizations that have adopted campaigns for the empowerment of rural women to revive economies and rural landscapes. The [International Labour Organization \(2012\)](#) suggests that the country could actually resolve issues of food security and poverty through empowering rural women. The International Center for Research on Women ("Economic Empowerment") also emphasizes that women's higher involvement in the economy reduces poverty rates, and that increasing access to resources for rural women increases agricultural production and food security. This contribution is significant in a society such as Brazil, which has high levels of inequality and obesity; in 2014, over half of the Brazilian population was overweight, and a fifth was obese ([International Food Policy Research Institute, 2015](#)), a phenomenon partly due to food insecurity in low-income areas ([Velasquez-Melendez et al., 2011](#)). Thus, the empowerment of women is not only important for women alone, but for the enhancement of society in general.

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2. Relevant literature on rural sociology and feminism

2.1. Theory

It is first critical in my analysis to identify the theorists that are at the foundation of my work. Chayanov's theory of peasant economy is integral to my research. Thorner (1986, xiii) explains that, within this theory, peasant farmers cannot be seen as having capitalistic enterprises because they do not employ outside labor, but depend solely on the members of their families for reproduction. Wages as a part of the reproduction process, therefore, are void; as such, peasant farmers cannot be considered capitalist.

According to Chayanov (1986), peasant farmers operate through an alternative mode of production to capitalism. Within this mode, every member of the peasant family has specific roles, and consumes proportionally to the labor that they contribute. As the labor power of a family increases, so does consumption; as it decreases, consumption decreases as well. Because the family is not a capitalist producer and therefore does not strictly seek the maximization of production, the peasant farmer family will produce an equilibrium, or the intersecting point between a family's demand satisfaction (consumption needs and wants) and its drudgery (exhaustion from work) (Chayanov, 1986). Through Chayanov's theory, we understand each member of the family as a worker within a non-capitalist workplace of the family farm.

Some have pointed out that Chayanov's theory does not recognize the actual lived experiences of modern family farmers in the field. De Janvry (1981), for instance, claims that Chayanov confuses the peasant farmer's lack of a desire to produce a surplus with the reality that he or she cannot produce a surplus under the oppressive characteristics of a capitalist system. De Janvry (1981, 106) distinguishes the peasant as a transitory step to the complete proletarianization of the farmer class into the commercialized workforce. De Janvry's (1981) theory asserts that farmers living in pre-capitalist conditions eventually must adopt capitalist logics in order to survive, and will often take wage cuts (ultimately driving up land prices) in order to continue.

Mann and Dickinson (1978) also posit that the family farm is an anomaly to Marxist theory, and that these farms have persisted due to the obstacles that have prevented capitalism from dissolving the peasant farm into bourgeoisie and proletariat. Once science and technology resolve these obstacles, the Mann–Dickinson thesis (Mann and Dickinson, 1978) states that all agriculture will become capitalist. McLaughlin (1998), however, claims that these theories rely on essentialist logics about family farmers and base their arguments on broad assumptions which bias their conclusions. He suggests analyzing the survival of family farms through the lens of organizational ecology, or a "Darwinian" (McLaughlin, 1998, 36) theory of evolution for the family farm. Throughout my research, all of these theories will be important in considering the different steps of the family farm that I look at: pre-commercial agriculture, the transitory phase, and post-commercial agriculture. While Chayanov is crucial to understanding pre-commercial agriculture, it is important to grasp post-Chayanov theories to analyze the transitions that family farms may make after the spread and influence of commercial agriculture.

Furthermore, my research takes a post-modern feminist approach, which assumes that differences between the genders are learned and performed through social structures. Judith Butler (1990) explains that, while sex is biological, gender is constructed, and members of society make gender possible by performing it every day within the structures (such as capitalism) through which we understand the world. These ideas are at the foundation of my research, in that I understand Southern Brazilian rural women not as naturally or biologically embodying any of the

roles they represent within rural and urban spheres, but as socialized into structures that determine what roles they should occupy and how much value those roles have within the workplace.

It is also important to recognize the specific background of the Brazilian feminist movement. Brazilian feminism was largely a result of international influence during the Brazilian military dictatorship. Figueiredo explains how many liberal women who were displaced during the dictatorship due to their political beliefs fled to countries like France or the United States, where feminism was gaining a lot of momentum (2008, 57). It was then that Brazilian women first began to organize around feminism, through groups such as the *Círculo de Mulheres Brasileiras de Paris* (Circle of Brazilian Women of Paris) (Figueiredo, 2008, 57).

Upon their return to Brazil after the dictatorship, these women brought feminism with them, and were largely criticized by the machisto society. Figueiredo explains that the introduction of feminism to Brazil brought on the mid-70s rupture into "moderate" and "radical" feminists (2008, 60). This feminist break was also described by Cecilia M.B. Sardenberg as "liberal vs. liberating empowerment" (2010), the former emphasizing the need for equal opportunities and development for individuals, and the latter aiming to free women as a group from a system that limits them.

During this time, moderate feminism was more popular within mainstream Brazilian society, and many initiatives were created in line with this mindset (Figueiredo, 2008, 61). Moderate feminists worked with the government to produce specific initiatives that promoted women's rights through the distribution of information and institutionalization. Government programs such as a campaign on violence against women were mobilized through moderate feminist influence; this specific campaign created extensive advertising to tell women that they were not at fault for machisto violence against them and that they were protected from this violence from the government, simultaneously creating strong government institutions to address the needs of any women who might come forward (Figueiredo, 2008, 65). Brazilian women have also had important roles in other social movements within the country that relate to the family. Post-dictatorship, women also were active organizers of advocating amnesty through the *Movimento Feminino pela Anistia* (Feminine Movement for Amnesty), which can again be attributed to "women's role of the preserver of the home and its members" (Blay, 2008, 381).

There have already been some movements for the empowerment of rural women, such as the *Movimento de Mulheres Agricultoras* (Agricultural Women's Movement, or MMA) of the Southern state Santa Catarina. Paulilo (2010) explains that this movement urges the particular need to empower women on farms, with the base that the intersection of "rural" and "woman" leads to asymmetrical oppression that must be addressed. The movement encourages Southern rural women to see themselves as producers rather than "of the home," as well as to change the norms of land inheritance to include more women. However, individual participation in this movement is difficult in that it directly involves women's personal lives; Paulilo (2010) remarks that women of this movement may be criticized by their families for going against masculine logics. The *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Brazilian Landless Workers Movement) has also incorporated women's issues into its objectives, such as women's equal access to land (Castro, 1999, 31).

This article seeks to follow the discourse of "liberating empowerment" in order to aspire to empowerment that is cultivated organically by Brazilian women on the macro-level, rather than seeking developmental "band-aid" solutions to disempowerment. As Sardenberg points out, many Latin American feminists are now wary of individual-level solutions to feminist issues that are motivated primarily by developmental interests, as these often further the goals

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