



Work division in family farm production units: Feminine responsibilities typology in a semi-arid region of Brazil



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 June 2011

Received in revised form

2 June 2013

Accepted 5 July 2013

Available online 10 August 2013

Keywords:

Brazilian semi-arid

Disadvantaged area

Peasantry

Rural women

Work factor

ABSTRACT

There has been evidence indicating that women in underdeveloped (or developing) countries carry a disproportionate burden of the costs of this economic dynamics while men enjoy its benefits. These criticisms on analysis moved gender from the periphery to the center of the development debate. Brazil and particularly the state of Ceará have not yet seen any of the repercussions of the analytical advances. This study on the role of women in the agriculture of the semi-arid aims to analyze the complexity of the factors that interact in order to recognize the nature of women's participation in semi-arid world areas comparatively to other disadvantaged environments. In the semi-arid area, rural women are able to cover a broader spectrum of tasks and fuller management activities when compared to other disadvantaged areas of the world. They cover all rural management activities. Besides, rural women's work is predominantly more complex when compared to men's work in semi-arid regions worldwide. Their greater ability to perform these activities is because these women combine different strategies in an efficient and dynamic way, adapting themselves to the demands of labor and the natural semi-arid environment.

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1. Introduction

A number of studies have been carried out in the last two decades concerning disadvantaged and ecologically vulnerable regions using typologies to understand, among other things, the relationship between technical management variables and the work factor (Gibon et al., 1995; Kobrich et al., 2003; Paz et al., 2008; Usai et al., 2006). In Brazil two studies applying classification systems to rural areas stand out: (i) the first, conducted by the UN through a FAO agreement with INCRA [National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform] (INCRA/FAO, 2000), focused on the availability of family work; (ii) the second, the Rurbano Project, carried out by the University of Campinas (Unicamp, São Paulo), was based on micro-data from the PNAD [Brazilian National Household Sample Survey] – 1992 to 1999 and 2001 (Del Grossi et al., 2002). These studies continue to serve as reference points for decision-making at public and private levels, although the classifications they use are not based on multifactorial statistical methodology. Moreover, though

they incorporate poverty and social inequality measurements, they do not specifically refer to female rural labor.

In the Brazilian Northeast, a region considered economically and ecologically vulnerable, there are very few studies that incorporate both the work factor and management indicators using multifactorial statistics (IBRD, 1975; Souza-Neto et al., 2004; de Almeida, 2004). The classification systems used do not distinguish component variables relating specifically to female labor. These typologies are based on a conventional economic rationality: the labor of the property owner, generally a man, is emphasized to a larger degree, whereas that of the rest of the family is classified as “help”. Women's labor is included in this “help”, pre-supposing that the responsibility for the management of the production unit is essentially from the male. An exception is the typology produced by Kobrich et al. (2003) in Chile, where the authors incorporated a specific variable of family work, “number of months a woman spends working within the productive unit”. As to Brazilian research we assume that these typologies were produced in a period when the main objectives of agricultural policy were related to production and to the economy. However, since the beginning of the Lula's presidency (2003–2010), the objectives of agricultural policy have been considerably expanded, encompassing issues relating to the environment and to the viability of rural life of non-

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elite sectors. To achieve this, the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) established technical assistance programs under the 'New National Policy of Technical Assistance and Rural Expansion' plan – PNATER – (Brazil-MDA, 2004). This plan was adapted to different territories and regional realities and took into account the recognition of diversity and specificities of gender and ethnicity. In view of these changes in the MDA policy, the typologies used for rural families need to be improved as an instrument with which to analyze and to monitor rural development without ignoring female participation in the formation of wealth. This entails observations on how to improve the productivity of agriculture and cattle farming, observations that were once exclusively directed towards men, despite the key role that women played in the production of food and trade in many peripheral countries (Noble, 1992). Furthermore, there has been mounting evidence that women in underdeveloped (or developing) countries carry a disproportionate burden of the costs of economic development while men enjoy its benefits (Beneria, 1981; Boserup, 1970; Buvenic and Youssef, 1980; Nelson, 1981). In part, due to the traditional gendered division of labor in agriculture, many development projects have further increased the burden on female labor, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (Noble, 1992).

These observations and criticisms on development plans moved gender from the periphery to the center of the development debate (Goddard, 1985) and provided greater economic and political support to programs and research specifically related to women in peripheral countries. Overcoming gender disparities at the political-economic level in both rural and urban environments is now a UN (2000) objective to be achieved world-wide by 2015. But, as usual, the world of rural women continues to attract little interest from other social and economic sectors. Traditional gender division conceals the size of women's economic participation in the formation of rural wealth and its consequent development. Female labor has been underestimated in the agrarian sector because it is not considered as primary and women are not commonly paid to produce food for consumption and trade in Family Units (FAO, 1996–2001). However, in periphery capitalist countries the economic position of rural women for many decades has been associated with their role in food production and preparation (World Bank, 1980, 2000). It is intrinsically associated with the nutrition and food security of poor populations (Pinstrup-Andersen and Marito, 1984). Many authors have shown (Benevides, 2004; Rua et al., 2000; Shalander, 2008; Vidal, 1995a,b; Vidal and Alencar, 2009; among others) what the involvement of rural women in farming production has meant to the development of this region, and therefore, of the country. Despite a certain growth in the awareness of gender issues around the world, systematic data on the work done by rural women and their contribution to the development of local economies is rare.

Brazil, and particularly the state of Ceará have not yet seen any of the repercussions of the analytical advances which took place during this decade. In Ceará, there have not been typological studies with or without the use of advanced statistics about the specific participation of women in the technical management of rural productive activities. Therefore, this is a fertile and challenging field for research.

This study, focused on the role of women in the agriculture of the semi-arid *Sertões* of Ceará, aims to analyze the complexity of the factors which interact in order to recognize the nature of women's participation in work within the micro-economy, bringing together the problematic of the feminization of poverty in Brazil (Brazilian Federal Chamber, 2004), and the economic and social investment in the value of family and peasant work in Lula's administration. Thus, this work seeks to characterize the diversity

of female work in the farming management of rural production. It offers approaches to recognize and to empower rural women regarding their participation in the formation of wealth in semi-arid world areas. The objectives of the current study were: (i) to describe the general sociological characteristics and to compare the more relevant rural work carried out by women in different communities in a Brazilian semi-arid region, (ii) to identify the explicative statistical components of the most important female activities and to establish typological groups of women according to the incidence of female work in that region, (iii) to compare the incidence and diversity of semi-arid women's most important activities with those in other disadvantaged world environments, and (iv) to identify what activities are prevalent among women in semi-arid rural regions of the world.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study area

The *Sertão* region in the Brazilian Northeast is characterized by marginal and threatened eco-systems, a great diversity of semi-arid landscapes and traditional customs. Its history, marked by *latifundia* (large estates) and intense inequality which is not only economic, lays bare the existing prejudice in relation to activities performed by women.

In the *Sertão*, drought together with the system of *latifundia* and gender discrimination have had an enormous impact, affecting mainly the rural poor and, more directly, women. In the Northeastern state of Ceará, in particular, this issue assumes strategic character, as a reduction was observed in the percentage of women living in rural areas of the interior, including the extensive *Sertão* areas (IPECE, 2008).

This study took place in the District of *Baixo Trici*, located in the Tauá Municipality, Inhamuns *Sertão*, State of Ceará, Brazil (Fig. 1). The Municipality of Tauá started to develop in 1762 in the Trici river valley, which forms the Alto Jaguaribe river basin. The municipality has a total area of 4017.19 km² and is located at an altitude of 402.7 m. It has an estimated population of 52,398 of which 52% live in rural areas (IPECE, 2009). The predominant climate is warm semi-arid tropical, with a mean annual rainfall of 597.2 mm which is concentrated in the period February–April and a mean annual temperature of 28 °C. The vegetation is made up of tropical xerophytic deciduous broadleaf scrub, known as Open Shrub *Caatinga* (FUNCEME, 2009). Economic activities of the rural communities relate primarily to the production of cows' milk and cheese and vegetables gardens and secondly to the production of meat from small ruminants (Araújo et al., 2008).

2.2. Data collection

Original and *in situ* data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews of 75 women from six different rural communities of the District of Baixo Trici, namely: Junco ($n = 16$), Tapera ($n = 16$), Lustal 1 ($n = 16$), Lustal 2 ($n = 9$), Tiassol ($n = 9$) and Queimadas ($n = 9$). The number (n) of women per community is different because it depended upon voluntary participation in this study. However, these differences preserved the women representation in all the communities. The current study encompassed 24.59% of rural women in these communities (Table 1). These women represented Family Farm Production Units (FPUs) in the project entitled the "Economic and social self-maintenance of rural communities through naturalized dairy goats in the semi-arid region of Inhamuns, Ce", funded by the CNPq [Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development], (Edict n°19/05).

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