

# Ways of Working and Ways of Subjectification in Family Agriculture in Southern Brazil

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**Abstract:** *This study analyzes the narratives of rural women workers about work in the context of family farming. Eighteen women associated with the rural workers social movement from the north-western region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil participated in this study. The methodological strategies adopted the genealogical approach in an ethnographic perspective. The resulting narratives express intersections between practices, linking the domestic spaces, of the farm and the social movement. The research findings raise reflections associated with the understanding of work as the maintenance of life and the possibility of transforming oneself and the world while the relationships between work and political action are seen as both achievements and challenges by these female rural workers.*

**Keywords:** *Work; Female rural workers; Political action; Social movement; Subjectivity*

## **Modos de trabalhar e modos de subjetivar na agricultura familiar no sul do Brasil**

**Resumo:** *Neste estudo, analisamos as narrativas de mulheres trabalhadoras rurais relacionadas ao trabalho no contexto da agricultura familiar. Participaram do estudo dezoito mulheres ligadas ao movimento social das trabalhadoras rurais da região noroeste do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. As estratégias metodológicas utilizadas obedeceram aos pressupostos da abordagem genealógica, seguindo uma perspectiva etnográfica. As narrativas produzidas expressam interseções entre as práticas ligadas aos espaços da casa, da propriedade e do movimento social. Dos resultados produzidos emergem reflexões associadas à compreensão de trabalho como manutenção da vida e possibilidade de transformação de si e do mundo, e as relações entre trabalho e ação política são vistas como conquistas e desafios a serem enfrentados pelas mulheres trabalhadoras rurais.*

**Palavras-chave:** *trabalho; mulheres trabalhadoras rurais; ação política; movimento social; subjetividade.*

*"If I could continue like this, I always ask God to give me health and the strength to work, to determine myself in life". (N.B., 59 years old).*

Over the past fifty years, the Brazilian context has been shaped by a series of changes, among them the end of dictatorial rule and a political opening, with a proliferation of social

movements claiming rights (Maria da Glória GOHN, 2007) alongside the migration of a large contingent of people from the countryside to the city. Agricultural production has undergone a series of technological (José VIEIRA FILHO; José SILVEIRA, 2012), political and economic transformations directed to ensuring a business rationality (Carlos Rodrigues BRANDÃO, 2007). Agribusiness has correspondingly consolidated itself as the hegemonic mode of production, affecting the ways of living, relating, and working.

The overview of the 2017 Agricultural Census (IBGE, 2019a; 2019b) identifies how 76.8% of Brazilian establishments belong to family farming while accounting for 23% of the area occupied by this sector. In turn, non-family establishments make up 23.2% of all establishments but represent 77% of the occupied area. The "distribution" of land is therefore disproportionate as are the resulting economic issues as, while non-family agriculture employs 33% of the occupied labor force, family agriculture is responsible for 67%.

Brazil thereby maintains the historical framework of social inequalities, ensured by an agrarian and land owning structure which places large extents of the land in the hands of a few people. This logic gains in strength when permeated by the scientific and technological arguments of "knowledge-power" that support the normativity of the rules followed by the capitalist rationale. Among these, a mode of production linked to agribusiness in order to feed millions of people, and a strict correlation between food security and the compulsory consumption of food with pesticides, even while these assumptions no longer constitute a consensus in the literature (Sérgio SCHNEIDER, 2003; 2010; 2016).

This set of transformations has instilled new ways of living in relation to social and family issues, work and income, with the advent of "new ruralities" (Maria José CARNEIRO, 2008; 2012; Karen KARAM, 2004; Maria Nazareth Baudel WANDERLEY, 2012). While bearing in mind this agricultural context, under constant transformation and propelling numerous tensions, including clashes in the struggle for land rights in different regions of the country, in this study, we summon up other rationalities beyond the expanding logic of capitalist "business rationality". Taking as a point of departure the ideas outlined by Brandão (2007) and Milton Santos (2009), we propose thinking about the ways of working in the field according to what we might call the counter-rationalities expressed in the modes of production tied to family farming.

As a structure for organizing life and work, agriculture from a family perspective may oppose the logic of non-family capitalist production. By relying primarily on the labor of each family member, production relations gain specificities in the organization and rhythms of the work process. Wanderley (2009, p. 156) highlights how family farming is not a recent social category but has, in Brazil, assumed an air of "novelty" and "renewal", which reflects in the respective definition since, as a generic category, family farming incorporates a wide variety of social forms and is "[...] understood as that in which the family, while owning the means of production, assumes the work in the productive establishment".

Schneider's (2016; 2010) studies place an emphasis on how family farming values the ethnic and cultural characteristics of the local population, with the family arrangements decisive in this scope. Among the effects of family farming practices on the lives of families and the community are: a) the preservation of the intangible regional culture, such as the language, beliefs, traditions, gastronomy; b) the promotion of food security for the population, based on production for self-consumption and the maintenance of links with local traders; c) the improvement of living and working conditions, and their consequences for health, education and preservation of the environment; d) the reduced usage of agrochemical inputs and the implementation of more sustainable production strategies, weaving closer relationships; and e) the co-responsibility between producer and consumer with the reduction of poverty and hunger through the employment of labor in the diversification of productive activities and pluri-activities (SCHNEIDER, 2010).

The changes taking place in production modes and family arrangements in terms of family farming have also been accompanied by transformations in the positions occupied by women in labor relations. It is worth remembering that in Brazil the very conditions for recognizing rural women as workers are very recent and date back only to 1988 when the Federal Constitution registered the right to remuneration for work performed by women in rural contexts (Rosineide de Lourdes Meira CORDEIRO, 2006). This recent achievement demarcates the invisibility of the work carried out by rural women despite their long days of daily activities, both inside and outside the home. The recognition by Brazilian legislation of women as rural workers resulted, to a large extent, from a long process of struggles and intense mobilizations for the conquest and subsequent implementation of the rights acquired. This process produced effects in the ways of working and subjectivation, altering the position of women in family agriculture from the hitherto "housewives" to "rural workers".

By resuming certain struggles of the rural women's movement and its achievements, in this study we aim to trace the effects of these experiences on the life narratives of women in rural contexts. In a special way, we focus on the intersections between gender, work, and political action in order to understand the effects of these achievements on family and work relationships, on women's daily working lives, and, in turn, on the ways they relate to themselves and to others.

Anchored in gender studies and subjectivation processes, the reflections presented here represent an extract from the doctoral thesis "Narratives of Self in Movement: a genealogy of the political action of rural working women in southern Brazil" (Rita de Cássia MACIAZEKI-GOMES, 2017), which analyzed the effects of political action on the production of subjectivity of rural working women in the northwest region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. For this study, we present clippings of the discussions related to work in the context of family farming from a gender perspective. Among the triggering questions are: What are the ways of working in rural contexts? And, especially, what are the narratives produced by female rural workers about their work experiences in family farming?

More specifically, in the context of family farming, we are interested in reflecting on the ways of working and of subjectifying oneself, under the focus of gender (Conceição NOGUEIRA, 2001), understood here both as a mode of struggle and as a category of analysis. In keeping with the recommendation of Joan Scott (1998), the debate refers in a broader way to the understanding of gender in its relational and power aspects.

The proposed analyses start out from the composition of the territory of family agriculture, the ways of working and subjectivity under the influences of German colonization from a gender perspective in the southern region of Brazil. This thus identifies the effects of the experiences of rural women workers as a collective production (SCOTT, 1998), incorporated into particular policies (SCOTT, 2005) and a discursive, historical and socially situated production of the analyses (Donna HARAWAY, 1995). Therefore, this reflective and analytical exercise leads us to follow the production of subjectivity (Félix GUATTARI; Suely ROLNIK, 1999) in family farming from the narratives of the women immersed in a peasant culture, the valorization of family and work, the land as a source of livelihood and the maintenance of life through family work (Maria Ignez Silveira PAULILO, 2004). The work performed in family farming articulates family, parental, consanguineous, and labor relations. The proposed exercise seeks to avoid polarization and the consequent simplification of the analyses. On the contrary, this aims to relate the multiplicity of nuances expressed in the singularity of the narratives of rural women workers.

The studies by Ellen Fensterseifer Woortmann (2000) on the German colonization in Rio Grande do Sul indicate that the family was a precondition for land ownership, and emigration was seen as a family project and not only an individual one. The preference in the distribution of plots of land was attributed to married men to the detriment of single men. In the discursive lines associated with colonization of German origin, we may identify the presence of rationalities linked to land, work, family, and religious belief as strategies to overcome the difficulties encountered in the immigration process and the organization of a new life on the other side of the ocean.

In this context, immersed in difficulties and challenges related to individual survival, family union, linked to the work in agriculture, became fundamental. To ensure subsistence, the family would need to stay united and organize the means to produce their livelihood from family farming. Family farming produces unique modes of subjectivation linked to housing, to family life, to shared family work, interwoven with the culture of German colonization in southern Brazil.

The work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, by Max Weber (2002), helps us understand the chain of knowledge and practices related to the ways of life of German descendants in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The presence of an ascetic behavior denotes work with a moral value that contributes to a mode of existence associated with a farming ethos (MACIAZEKI-GOMES et al., 2019), which produces ways of positioning oneself and relating to family and work.

The production of life associated with a farmer ethos reveals a mode of subjectivation permeated by knowledge and powers immersed in a configuration of forces expressed in union, religious, feminist, ascetic, and peasant practices. This conveys a particular way of relating to oneself and to others, of appropriation of the territory of family farming in southern Brazil that enunciates the effects of an ascetic moral in the habits, customs, and values marked by German colonization. In this cultural configuration, heritage is linked to the culture and tradition of valuing family, work, and the economy (oiko-nomos), hence, linked to the management of family life through the incorporation of morality.

The ascetic morality, brought by German colonization, denotes ways of undertaking, building, changing and transforming one's own condition through work. It is in this sense that working the land and production "in a family way" magnifies the honor, honesty, and reputation of the family.

Concomitant to the function that Protestant asceticism had in the configuration of the Weberian "capitalist spirit," here, this morality gains its own contours to the extent that it is connected both to peasant culture (José Maria TARDIN, 2012), with its production for subsistence, and to community relations stimulated by Catholic Christianity. In this reading, this does not mean the predominance of the Protestant religion as there was a strong Catholic presence in the region. Highlighted here instead is the permanence of a certain culture in which work stands out as the central dimension of existence so that "the most important thing was that, above all, work came to be considered in itself the very purpose of life" and, furthermore, the "lack of the will to work is a symptom of the lack of grace" (WEBER, 2002, p. 120).

In this community context, the ties of reciprocity are fostered by social self-organization, associative ventures, cooperatives, and, later, in the union movement and the social movement of rural women workers. The cultural legacy of the German ethnicity, intersected with other cultures, contributes to political action and to community autonomy. The northwest region of Rio Grande do Sul stands out for the rise of a cooperative economic network, composed of production structures, product commercialization (supermarkets), a credit cooperative (community bank), and electricity supply. The family is an integral part of the community and subordinated to it in terms of rules, values and customs.

By taking into account the historical, procedural, relational, and situated character of the issues raised, in this study we aim to analyze the narratives of rural women workers regarding the effects of the experiences of working and subjectivizing themselves in family farming in the southern region of Brazil.

## Methodological strategies

The structure of the research was inspired by the genealogical approach of Michel Foucault (1995). This methodological path thus took into account the listening, recording and analyzing of the narratives of work-related experiences to compose: the historicization of how the discursive practices emerge in family relationships, work, spaces of action and political participation in the social movement, how relationships with oneself and with others are produced; and the mapping of the games of knowledge and power and subjectivity effects produced from the practices, the dispositives.

The insertion and monitoring of activities in the spaces of the home, the property, and the social movement of rural women workers, in addition to semi-structured interviews, comprised the research design. Eighteen rural women workers, members of the Rural Workers Union and participants in a Rural Women's Movement, took part in the study. The analyses contemplated mapping the ways of working associated with the specificities of family agriculture in the southern region of Brazil, articulated with insertion in the women's social movement. The life trajectory, linked to the inheritance of land, work, and family (MACIAZEKI-GOMES et al., 2019) narrated by the women constituted the guiding thread of the reflections and analyses.

The production of the results contemplates the relations and productions of gender together with family and work (PAULILO, 1987; 2000; 2004; 2009), economic and generational issues (PAULILO; Cristiani Bereta da SILVA, 2007), schooling processes; ways of working associated with family farming, and rural succession. This further considers the appropriation of territories that, in rural contexts, trigger ways of life characteristic of ruralities (WANDERLEY, 2000; MACIAZEKI-GOMES; NOGUEIRA; TONELI, 2016), demarcated by both a geographical and a subjective circumscription.

## Ways of working and ways of subjecting in family farming in southern Brazil

The study was carried out in a small town, located in the northwest region of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Eighteen women members of the Movement of Rural Women Workers (MMTR), associated with the Rural Workers Union, participated. The participants were between 30 and 67 years old. Two were single, aged 31 and 42, and without children. One of the participants, 59 years old, was a widow, and the others were married with one, two, or three children, with the exception of participant V.B., 30 years old, who had no children, and participant L.P., 67 years old, with nine children. Most women have an average of two children and report coming from a family with an average of eight siblings.

Regarding education, one did not study, ten did not complete elementary school, one did not finish high school while six had graduated from high school. In turn, most reported their parents as having either little or no schooling. As for their own children, schooling and professional training, at the high school/technical and college levels, appear as goals to be attained through support from the whole family. Most women have teenage and/or young children who no longer live in the same house. The participants all declared they were farmers and, throughout the text below, are identified by the initials of their names.

In the northwest region of Rio Grande do Sul, due to climatic instability – whether excessive rain or drought – and the unpredictability around income deriving from agricultural production, many families decided to invest in raising dairy cattle and supplying milk to the dairy industries in the region. The rhythm of this type of work demands dedication from the women, many hours a day, but is nevertheless perceived as “less hard” and with the likelihood of greater profitability than agriculture, which involves planning the profits related to the cycle from planting to harvesting. Women are also engaged in the farming activities related to family agriculture, such as planting food products in the garden for household consumption and selling the production of milk and food products, such as cheese, cookies, jams, and marmalade. Women are responsible for managing the domestic

activities, related to food and house cleaning, caring for the children, the sick and/or the elderly, and taking care of the property's animals. In most families, this task is done by the couple.

For the systematization and presentation of the results, the discussions were grouped into two thematic dimensions: (i) On work as life maintenance and the opportunity to transform oneself and the world; (ii) On the relationships between work and political actions: the achievements and challenges of women as rural workers.

## On work as life maintenance and self- and world- transformation

This thematic dimension evokes discussions associated with the understanding of work as a paradox (SCOTT, 2005) in women's lives. Whilst work may simultaneously be approached as an exhausting activity, related to subsistence and producing overload, work can also evoke movements of change in relation to the expectations outlined by the women themselves regarding their lives and futures.

From the results produced, the narratives of female rural workers present ways of living and working in family agriculture anchored on planning and organization together with the family to the detriment of an individual life project. From childhood to adulthood, women narrate their life trajectories marked by both the presence of labor activities and by the transformations experienced in the ways of working linked to family farming. Already during childhood there is inclusion in activities linked to the planting of food and responsibilities for the caring of small animals as one participant mentions: *I know that when I was six years old, I took care of eighteen pigs [...] we worked a lot when we were little* (S.E., 44 years old).

Childhood memories report parental financial difficulties in providing food, clothing and schooling for a large number of offspring. Due to the scant resources, food and clothing were prioritized. In turn, advancement in schooling was far from meeting any of the family's immediate needs. The scarce resources to pay for school transportation, clothing, and school supplies, added to the loss of the labor for agriculture, made attending school a challenge:

*We started from nothing and I, still a little girl, had to live with my grandparents for a period of time even to be able to go to school [...] then I ended up working as a nanny... I went to the fields working early in the morning when I was seven, eight years old* (A.S., 42 years old).

For many women, their insertion in labor activities, alongside those of other family members, was important for guaranteeing the food security of the family unit, as expressed by J.B. (53 years old): *you had to work on the land, that's it [...] this was our sustenance*.

In this period, learning was associated with the activities performed in the daily work routine and passed down from generation to generation. However, the desire to study, or "to have studied longer", was a constant in the statements: *I studied until the fifth grade [...] but because I liked to study so much, I repeated the fifth grade for half a year, again [...] I always liked to study* (L.M., 56 years old); or, else, *I cried, I would have liked to continue, but my parents couldn't afford it* (C.W., 57 years old). As for the family, all women affirm that their children have been reaching a higher level of schooling than their own and that studying is seen as a family priority.

The transformations in the world of work have produced other means of thinking and positioning themselves in relation to schooling: *Today, study is first, before it wasn't* (O.H., 47 years old). A greater investment in schooling is directly related to the premise that studying will bring a "better life" which, in turn, does not always refer to permanence and the continuity of work in the field. Here, we glimpse the problem of the youngest migrating to the city and the issue of rural succession. At the same time as they express their desire to live close to their children, the women state that life and work in the field are "very hard" and wish a "better life" for their children.

From generational analysis, one can observe an improvement in schooling, income, and technological increments in relation to the family of origin as demonstrated by the cases of L.P. and A.P.: *I used to milk seven, eight cows by hand* (L.P., 67 years old). *At the time, she [her mother] worked very hard. Today there is machinery to do the work so we can't be hsrd on ourselves, we need to think about our health* (A.P., 31 years old). Women refer to investments in technology, in the use of agricultural machinery, in the reform, expansion or construction of the house, land acquisition, expansion of the number of dairy cows, improvements in the production unit infrastructure, such as the expansion of the shed, improvements in the milking parlor, such as the purchase of milking machines, milk coolers, among others.

In large part, these improvements were driven by access to public policies directed at family farming. The Program for the Strengthening of Family Farming (PRONAF), PRONAF Mulher, Food Acquisition Program (PAA), National School Meals Program (PNAE), National School Transportation Support Program (PNATE), and the National Land Credit Program (PNCF) all stand out. Moreover, as Catia Grisa and Sergio Schneider (2015, p. 127) report, it is central to highlight that "in 2006, the Family Farming Law was regulated, which recognized the social category, defined its conceptual structure, and started to guide public policies for this social group. To have access to these public

policies, families needed to adapt and comply with specific requirements, such as the presentation of personal and family documentation, as well as clear definitions about family constitution and “marital status”, to be included as beneficiaries.

*It is very confusing this story of single and married because of business sometimes (laughs). When we went to buy the land through a bank, Banco do Brasil, there was some trouble. Our financing was delayed for a year. Then the man called us there and said, “After all, what are you? No, we are single, but if we have to get married to buy this land, we will (I.M., 55 years old).*

In order to get land credits and gain the right to have rights, public policies imprint a process of life regulation, associated with biopolitical strategies as a form of power that governs individuals and the whole population (FOUCAULT, 2012). The need for subjective and family molding to public policies produces other modes of family and relational organization, according to gender normative premises (Judith BUTLER, 2015; Jo LITTLE; Ruth PANELLI, 2003) that bring about direct effects on people’s lives translated into the narrative that *if we have to marry [...] we will marry* (I.M., 55 years old).

To improve their living and working conditions, families have committed to long-term financing. The idea of getting into debt that cannot be honored is a constant concern. The narrativity expressed by the order of the family discourse determines: *you can be poor but never dirty* (C.W., 57 years old), that is, not to get into a debt that may dishonor the family name. The legacy of an ascetic moral that imposes greater effort and more work to remain “with a clean name”, without debts, still prevails.

If the increase in machinery made the work lighter, its maintenance conditioned family members to work long hours in order to honor the financial commitments made to acquire the equipment. Hence, even with the increase in new technologies, women experienced no decrease in their number of working hours.

*So, sometimes I have to work at night. Of course, these days the fair was a special case... I worked like this... I slept until six, got up, and kept doing it to see if on the last day we would have something to sell (I.M., 55 years old).*

Permeated by patriarchal rationality, women are assigned responsibilities as the family caregivers. They are responsible for taking care of the husband, the children, the sick and the elderly, in addition to household chores, such as cleaning and food preparation, and the farm duties – from animal husbandry to food production in the garden. In addition, together with their children and husband, they carry out agricultural activities for consumption and marketing, as well as dealing with the dairy cattle, configuring care practices immersed in a normative and patriarchal logic (MACIAZEKI-GOMES et al., 2019).

Care-related tasks have historically been assigned to women and are integrated into a set of activities they perform as part of a daily work routine marked by the sexual division of labor in which caring is produced and legitimized as a female responsibility. On the concept of care, Danièle Kergoat (2016, p. 17) identifies how “we can define it as a relationship of service, support and assistance, paid or unpaid, that implies a sense of responsibility towards the life and well-being of others.”

In the sense presented by the author, the unpaid care activities performed by women farmers can be analyzed as central reproductive work in the production of food for subsistence and for marketing as the well-being of family members is a pre-condition of the family working in the (re) production units. Moreover, regarding the conceptualization of family farming and the narratives analyzed in this study, women’s work is determinant in the set of (re)productive activities carried out in family units.

Other aspects can further aggravate women’s working overload when considering the absence of public policies that enable the provision of care services, such as early childhood education facilities. Therefore, in addition to a more equal sexual division of labor between women and men in the family, it is important to consider the central role of the state in ensuring the public policies that meet the needs of rural populations and family agriculture.

The issues highlighted about reproductive and caregiving activities are pertinent given that the amount of work expressed in the number of hours worked by women in the countryside still remains very large - in the quantity and diversity of activities - and long - in the amount of hours spent performing them (Natalia FONTOURA; Clara ARAÚJO, 2016). During the day, they work *many hours, because the time I’m not working outside, I’m working inside [home]* (N.B., 59 years old).

For some women, there is a clear division between the activities performed inside and outside the home. The domestic activities related to cleaning, maintenance and organization of the house, caring for the children and, especially, for bedridden and sick elderly were expressed as causing physical and emotional overload.

Among the difficulties pointed out was the need to mediate intergenerational conflicts between children and in-laws living in the same house in addition to the “non-work” connotation of

these activities. Among the strategies found for solving the conflicts is to exit from "inside the house" and to enter the agricultural activities, as expressed by L.D. (43 years old): *If I go to the farming, it takes the stress away*. Going to work in the fields is thereby associated with the idea of "being hard at work," paradoxically producing a sense of relief and well-being. It signals the attempt to distance oneself from the traditional gender attributions delegated to women, causing a sense of imprisonment from a mode of subjectivation expressed as "do(r) lar". Or, alternatively, still in the words of Paulilo (1987), the "weight of light work".

The "leaving home", seen as an efficient strategy in the short term does not, in turn, produce ruptures to the traditional gender demarcations imprinted in the family farm panorama, imposed by the double working day "inside and outside" the home (PAULILO, 2004). The transformation of family culture, as regards working activities in family spaces, represents one of the most challenging gender and work issues.

The long working day, naturalized in daily life, does not appear as a complaint in the women's narrative. The exercise of working activities, since childhood, contributes to the chain of common experiences associated with the centrality of work: *For me, everything is work [...] there is no job that I don't do* (L.D., 43 years old); or still: *I see work as the most important thing in our lives. Because you need to work, right? To support yourself [...] to survive [...]* (S.E., 44 years old).

The work associated with survival appears as compulsory, as something that just needs doing. In this context, women are expected to play the role of "good mother" and "good wife", who can support and "follow" her husband, with the objective of keeping the family united and producing together, fed by a religious moral of resignation and acceptance in which each one "gives of themselves" for the sake of the family. According to the cultural inheritance received, the man owns the land, through rural succession, and manages the productive and family unit. This family way of organizing life, permeated by patriarchal and religious rationalities, with the affective and financial alliance deposited in the marriage contract, ensures the maintenance of the land-work-family tripod (MACIAZEKI-GOMES et al., 2019).

If work, in this sense, produces exhaustion and suffering, on the other hand, it also triggers shifts from "maintenance" to the "production" of life. Work as production undertakes efforts to transform the condition of what one is, making it possible to "determine oneself in life" and, thus, achieve self-government by means of the practices carried out. Work, as action of the self upon the self and the transformation of nature, occupies a prominent place in the lives of women and families. It relates, in the case of women, to a greater degree of autonomy, as expressed: *If I could continue like this, this I always ask God that He gives me health and the strength to work, to determine myself in life [...]* (N.B., 59 years old).

The women's narratives show the valuation of work and of the strong relations with a past that is actualized and made present through the maintenance of life and of a present that ceases to be in the production of another becoming. It is even seen as a strategy for the production of health, in the words of C.W. (57 years old): *I don't even think about stopping [...] because I think that some of my health is working*. Work gives meaning to life, as a positioned action, production that establishes the recognition of oneself. Seen as something "that gives pleasure," work is recalled as a strategy for overcoming and achievement.

## **On the relationship between work and political action: achievements and challenges of women as rural workers**

Participation in the rural women workers social movement has contributed to foster changes in the ways of working in family farming. These changes were generally associated with the ways in which women positioned themselves in family relationships and related to themselves and others (MACIAZEKI-GOMES, 2017).

The mobilization process in the struggle for rights required rural women to leave the home and occupy the public space and, as such, gain recognition as rural workers in the 1988 Federal Constitution. Access to social and social security rights, such as the right to retirement, provided the appreciation and recognition of the work done by women, contributing to their capacity to occupy other spaces beyond the private sphere.

The implementation of these changes still remains a daily challenge faced by rural women, inside and outside the home. At the time, joining the social movement meant breaking away from the places assigned to women and, sometimes, having their posture and behavior questioned by the community. According to normative standards, a woman who did not stay at home and "walked down the street" without her husband, i.e., who dared to break with the gender norms (BUTLER, 2015) was not morally respected and led to her not being "well seen" in the community.

The act of going out and leaving the children under the care of the husband meant, among other things, breaking with the cultural heritage hitherto assigned to rural women. The conquest of rights associated with a profession would leave behind the images of women produced in the social imaginary as restricted to wife, mother, and housewife. Therefore, we may draw some approximations

with the work of Cordeiro (2006), when he describes the difficulties faced by rural women in the Northeast to conquer a greater freedom to come and go. The “control” and “account” of their acts needed to be “rendered” to the whole community that would or would not validate them. Within this scenario, how to produce other possibilities beyond this already predefined situation? How to open up to new processes of subjectivation, and at what cost? The achievement of a greater degree of autonomy and freedom still seems to be among the obstacles to be overcome in the building of more egalitarian gender relations. Incorporating other practices has not always been an easy task for women but nevertheless remains part of a process under construction in which *if we want to change something, we have to help each other* (V.B., 30 years old).

When asked about their profession, all the women declared without hesitation: “I am a farmer”. By calling themselves “farmers”, the women demarcate a political position, proud of the conquest of being considered “rural workers”. In the narrative produced, the process of struggling to obtain social and legal recognition as rural workers encountered a series of challenges. Among them, there was the campaigning for the right to become members of rural workers unions, as individual members and no longer as dependents, as well as with the right to share land ownership with husbands (Carmen Diana DEERE, 2004).

The demands for social and pension rights, especially for retirement, mobilized discussions inside and outside trade union circles and generated visibility for the work done by women (MACIAZEKI-GOMES et al., 2016). Within the trade union context, this agenda triggered deep tensions. Women had no right to assume an active voice nor to be members of the union. The husband, as the family representative, was the only member who decided what was best for the family. The approval of women as members of the Rural Workers Union meant their recognition as rural workers, no longer as dependents of their husbands. Additionally, the status of union member encouraged further mobilization and demands on other issues, such as the right to have their own identification documents.

Indeed, any affirmation and recognition as a farmer demanded the organization of formal identification documentation. Having their own documents also meant a greater degree of independence from their husband, since until then they were identified by the husbands’ social security number. (G.H., 55 years old).

*[...] it was only the man, the man who made the debt and the woman didn't even know what the man was doing... we work very hard here so that the woman is visible and can sign together. Many complained, a lot of bureaucracy, it is difficult, but the fact that she comes to town and signs together is already a fact that she knows what is being done on the property* (G.H., 55 years old).

Once in possession of such documentation, women were then able to claim the inclusion of their names on property deeds and documentation as well as access to public policies. In turn, the condition of greater participation by women produced effects on family relations.

In order to register women, “documentation campaigns” were organized, and a collective identity, as a “farmer”, encouraged by the union movement, was agreed upon. This movement produced visibility for the women about themselves, in the family, in the community, and in the social movement (Vanderléia DARON, 2003; CORDEIRO, 2004; PAULILO; SILVA, 2007; Marco Aurélio Máximo PRADO; Carmella de Paula Ferreira CAMPICI; Sara Deolinda PIMENTA, 2004; Celecina de Maria Veras SALES, 2007; Giovana Ilka Jacinto SALVARO, 2010; SALVARO; Mara Coelho de Souza LAGO; Cristina Scheibe WOLFF, 2013; 2014; Alie Van Der SCHAAF, 2003).

Recognition as a female farmer contributed to the formal entry of women into discussions about the organization and management of the productive unit. The expression “there is no boss”, used by many when asked about who coordinates the property, results from a long process of struggle by the women’s movement for women to emerge out of the guardianship of their husbands so that they can position themselves and be heard in family decisions that involve the planning and execution of daily work activities.

In terms of the organization of working processes on the property, most women state that the decisions and agreements are made between the couple, *there is no boss, we do it, we talk* (C.K., 45 years old). The financial issues, such as the purchase of machinery and loans for the purchase of land, through to the division of tasks to be performed on the property are agreed upon.

*[...] it is just communicating and planning [...] each one knows what they have to do, when you have been so many years in the countryside, you know what you have to do each week... then we agree [...] he does his part and when he needs, he tells me, then we prepare ourselves so that I can help [...] the day that I need him, he also helps me, then he prepares himself* (N.E., 36 years old).

The opportunity to discuss and participate in activities organized by the social movement strengthened the demarcation of more active and persistent positions towards overcoming the situations of oppression faced (MACIAZEKI-GOMES; Judit HERRERA ORTUÑO, 2020). Women claim these discussions have contributed to rethinking their condition and (re)positioning themselves within the home, which does not mean the absence of tensions and clashes.

*We went to defend a policy focused on family farming [...] I know it is very hard, that sometimes we are criticized, but never give up for that, girls, be proud of being there, of having left home (S.E., 44 years old).*

In the context of family farming, leaving home can be associated with the construction of more egalitarian relations, whether for the care of the children, or for the chores of the productive unit, as well as the demands for rights through implementing public policies.

However, the division and performance of domestic chores were pointed out as challenges women still faced. The husband's participation in domestic activities is seen as "help" and women take upon themselves the responsibility and the "duty" for performing them. As already pointed out, there is an evaluation of work as exhausting, due to the large amount of hours worked per day but the opportunity to work is simultaneously taken as a personal and social gratification. In the regional culture, recourse to the expression "a gente é alemoa" (we are a bit German) establishes a relationship with an ascetic moral heritage, attributing a positive valuation of work as an immediate means for social recognition, and being considered a "working" woman becomes extremely valued by the community.

In the production unit, the unaccomplished work accumulates with the next day's work. The need for such extensive workloads for women stems from the scarcity of labor and the difficulty of participating on a more constant basis in the social movement of rural women workers. If, on the one hand, among the transformations taking place in recent years are the improvements to working processes through the application of technology, the decrease in the number of children resulted in the shrinkage of the family labor force, which contributed to the difficulty for women to leave the property. The labor overload performed by the couple is naturalized, seen as something they need to "take care of," manage, and organize for the work process: *We never have vacations, you know, I think there are few, few people to do everything (N.E., 36 years old).*

Thus, among the challenges faced, even with signs of improvement in the working conditions, remains the balance between an exhausting and "tough" way, marked by the search for survival, and the idea that *food is no longer a struggle because times have changed*, as I.M. says (55 years old).

*I don't think money should be a problem anymore nowadays. No matter how hard we work [work hard] day and night. I don't know [...], we have many of these remnants from the past, in the colony too. People died of hunger, literally, in the middle of the woods. There was no money. There was no access to health, nothing. But times have changed, so let's stop fighting for things that no longer exist... so, life can be lighter [...] everything has to be different, right. If life is better, it has to be better in fact, right? (I.M., 55 years old).*

The incorporation of these changes means, among other things, paying attention to alterations in the ways of seeing, feeling and thinking about the world. In the family histories, work was considered a central factor, linked to maintenance and, little by little, now seems to be shifting to the production of life.

Work as production characterises the idea of something essential and necessary in life, which seems to signal shifts, as an activity that can be thought, discussed and carried out in the family. In this sense, participation in the women's social movement contributed to fostering movements of change initiated by women. A positive connotation begins to be attributed to work, as a transformation of the condition one lives in, a condition for the opportunity to "determine oneself in life", in an exercise of self-government through the practices carried out. In this process, it comes to establish ways of working that trigger modes of subjectivation (Tania Mara Galli FONSECA, 2002).

## Final considerations

In this study, we analyzed the narratives of rural women workers about the effects of experiencing ways of working and subjectivizing themselves in family farming, in the northwestern region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. The narratives produced express intersections between practices linked to the spaces of home, property, and the social movement. The analytical findings focus on the territory of family farming, the ways of working and subjectivizing under the influences of German colonization, in the southern region of Brazil, from a gender, discursive, historical and socially situated perspective.

From the results produced, reflections emerge associated with the understanding of work as the maintenance of life and the possibility of transforming oneself and the world. The work in family farming, in the south of Brazil, presents specific characteristics, including the fact that the labor activities carried out in the family circuit intermix with affective-family relationships. In the family, each person needs to work and do his or her part in order to generate the family's income. The organization of work routines is tied not only to the weather conditions but also to family customs and traditions.

In the women's narrative, the valuation of work appears as something constitutive. The work done by women becomes fundamental for the productive and economic organization of the family,

ensuring the “maintenance of life”. However, this work is not always recognized and even valued by the family and the community. Paradoxically, simultaneously to expressing fatigue, resulting from the long days inside and outside the home, women also associate work with feelings of well-being, satisfaction, fulfillment, and strength. Thus, as a possibility of transformation both of themselves and their living conditions. Besides supplying the financial needs and immediate survival, of “life maintenance”, work is related to the “production of life”. This is immersed in a historicity, linked to the memories of a past that is again brought up to date, gaining support and relief from pain out of the sacrifices of the body. When questioned how the work related practices are being carried out, these women do not show any intention of stopping working but rather of composing other ways of working.

Their difficulties are many, even in the wake of the transformations triggered by the new ruralities. Over the years, there have been improvements in working conditions following the implementation of technology and infrastructure, diversification in the work done, and access to credit lines from Brazilian government social programs. However, the intense and extensive workload has not decreased. Despite the division of tasks between the couple, the woman continues to undertake a longer working day and remains responsible for taking care of the tasks “inside and outside the home”. On the other hand, couples do now seem to constitute more flexible relationships that are open to negotiations about how to organize work activities.

The relationships between work and political action are seen as achievements and challenges still to be faced by rural women workers. It is noteworthy that women’s membership and participation in the rural women’s movement have created fissures in the sexual division of labor in the family. Membership and participation in the women’s movement have opened spaces for the discussion of ideas that had hitherto remained naturalized within the family context.

With the departure from home and greater involvement in the activities of the women’s movement, negotiations and (re)adjustments between couples had to be made. The space of the women’s social movement proved conducive to the movement of life, when placing on the agenda the issues and challenges present in the daily work of women farmers. By opening gaps and making people think, it optimized memories and collective achievements, such as the acquisition of social and pension rights, contributing to resistance strategies and creativity in the ways of working allied to the “movement” of life and not to its imprisonment and suffering.

Work as the “maintenance, production, and movement” of life does not signal the stages obtained or the barriers already overcome by women. This rather signals interfaces in the same process searching for a re-signification of the ways of working, of reflecting on and problematizing the conditions of (in)visibility and recognition of the work done. Work as a constitutive dimension of a farming ethos endows women with an identity as rural workers so that the struggle for the recognition of this condition operates as a device for subjectivation within family farming.

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#### BACKGROUND

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