

## PEASANT WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES



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### ABSTRACT

The work proposes to reflect on the presence of characteristic traits of the peasantry in contemporary agriculture. The course taken is based on the specificity of the Brazilian peasantry in relation to the classic debate held in Europe, examining the adoption of the category family farming as a diverse plural, hiding the permanences of the past in order to highlight the changes that have taken place. Based on a literature review, associated with the analysis of documents collected from the Peasant Women's Movement (MMC), interviews conducted with participants of this movement and, also, using work carried out with family farmers in Itaqui-RS, it is sought to support the main guiding argument in empirical evidence. Women are taken as a thematic axis that allows us to understand in their struggle and in their definitions, the presence of peasant traits in contemporaneity.

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These traits differentiate peasant agriculture from other family farmers, with the relationship with the land, partial insertion in markets and social reproduction as the guiding objective of the organization of production and the way of life, basic elements of this type of agriculture. It points to the change in the role of women in recent periods (since 2003), assuming their protagonism and constituting a way of thinking and acting in agriculture consistent with the definition of peasant women.

**Keywords:** Peasant Agriculture, Rural Women, Contemporary Agriculture.

## INTRODUCTION

This work faces the challenge of characterizing a group of women farmers as peasants. This implies a conceptual effort and an understanding of women as members of a family agriculture considered heterogeneous, but which is not always recognized in the literature as presenting peasant traits. This difficulty in detecting these traits can be attributed to the plurality of conceptions of the term peasant, a phenomenon aggravated by the specificity presented by the "peasantry" in Brazil in the face of the classic debate in Europe.

The challenge that is faced begins with the identification of peasant traits in current Brazilian agriculture, which is usually diluted in a term family farming that includes in its scope a diversity of forms of space exploration <sup>9</sup>and insertion in the market, implying differentiated characteristics of social reproduction.

Starting from these peasant traits in contemporary times, empirical evidence about this presence is sought in the social movements of the countryside, through documents and literature, complemented with interviews with women from the Peasant Women's Movement. Women and their emergence as agents of the struggle for their recognition as protagonists of agriculture conceived as "peasant" are taken as the object of study. In this approach, the transformations in the agricultural and rural universe are related to the permanences of dimensions that did not disappear in the historical course (as abundantly suggested in the literature in the 1970s and 1980s),<sup>10</sup> but on the contrary, they were affirmed as elements of the constitution of a certain segment of family farming. This constitution in a dynamic process of socio-cultural and environmental characteristics contributes to explain the preservation of farmers with ways of life that are heirs and close to what can be understood as peasant.

In addition to the evidence sought in social movements, we will use the reference of a case studied by the author in a context that we could characterize as a subaltern family agriculture or, in another way, forgotten in the gaps of a capitalist corporate agriculture. This case refers to the municipality of Itaqui, on the western border of Rio Grande do Sul and

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<sup>9</sup> In Geography, the form of space exploration refers to the way in which a social group transforms bio-geo-physical conditions and organizes production systems and a socio-institutional, cultural and environmental environment.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, it was common to say that the peasantry would disappear with the process of modernization of agriculture, following the propositions of Lenin and Kaustki. They considered that the small production that still existed would not be reproduced, as it would not present conditions for the adoption of capital-intensive technologies and meet market demands.

where family farming with peasant traits is experienced (the argument that supports this statement is being explained below).

In summary, the present work proposes an analysis of the role of women in contemporary agriculture, articulating it with the alleged peasant characteristic that we intend to make explicit. It consists of an approach to a theme that has been investigated by the author, the issue of gender in family farming, seeking a theoretical reflection; this reflection is based on the bibliographic references proposed in the *Family Agriculture and Peasantry component*, which is part of the curricular structure of the Graduate Program in Rural Extension.

## METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the work is based on the literature review, the documents produced by social movements, interviews with women participating in the MMC and the author's experience in Itaqui-RS, involving the application of questionnaires with the women targeted by the investigation carried out in 2022 (CARABAJAL, 2022).

In the literature review, texts suggested in the component *"Family Agriculture and Peasantry"* of the Master's Degree in Rural Extension at UFSM are examined; the aim was to constitute an understanding of the concept of peasantry in Brazil, which assumes differences from the classical European conceptualizations. It was also sought to analyze the consolidation of the concept of family farming in its heterogeneity, highlighting the peasant traits that remain in the contemporary context.

Documents from social movements and articles that explain the role of women in contemporary family farming and the differences that would be inherited from a peasant way of life are examined.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with peasant women in Chapecó-SC at the *South American meeting "Women and Agroecology"*, held on September 5 and 6, 2024; In this meeting, sources such as lectures, group debates and conversations with key informants also contributed with relevant elements in the construction of this article.

Information collected from women farmers in Itaqui-RS with whom the author developed extension and research actions from 2020 to 2023 is used. This includes a questionnaire applied via google forms (CARABAJAL, 2022).

## **THE CONCEPT OF PEASANT: CONTEMPORARY POSSIBILITIES**

The concept of peasant goes back to a historical and cultural tradition that associates the peasant with the land and subsistence agriculture. However, this classical notion, present both in Europe and in Brazil, has undergone transformations over time, especially in the face of the changes caused by agricultural modernization and the advance of capitalism. In this sense, analyzing the peasant today requires a look that considers the permanences and ruptures throughout history, rescuing the elements that still persist and characterize this form of life.

In Europe, the peasant was largely defined by his direct connection with the land, marked by the subsistence family economy and relative autonomy from the market. In the work of Chayanov (1974), for example, the economic logic of the peasantry stands out, in which the objective is not to accumulate capital, but to guarantee the social reproduction of the family. This understanding of the peasant as an autonomous productive unit has been widely studied and, even if in different contexts, has influenced the way peasant agriculture is understood in various parts of the world.

In Brazil, the concept of peasant gained its own nuances, especially due to the peculiarities of the colonization process and land concentration. Unlike the European context, where peasant agriculture developed alongside more advanced forms of economic organization, in Brazil the peasantry has always lived with large estates aimed at the foreign market. Authors such as Wanderley (2003) and Picolotto (2022) point to the persistence of forms of peasant organization, even in the face of a scenario of strong pressure from agribusiness. This resistance is a fundamental mark of the Brazilian peasantry, which reorganizes and redefines itself over time.

According to the above-mentioned authors, the transformation of peasant agriculture into family farming in Brazil, especially from the 1990s onwards, with the introduction of public policies aimed at this segment, reveals both ruptures and continuities with the peasant past. Family farming, today, encompasses a diversity of productive practices and forms of organization, but still preserves characteristic elements of peasant agriculture, such as the centrality of family work and the direct relationship with the land. In this sense, the notion of peasant permanence emerges as a form of resistance to the pressures of capitalism, while adapting to new market demands and technological transformations (QUEIROZ, 1963). In addition, Neves (1985) addresses the importance of peasant identity,

its social and economic implications, emphasizing the relevance of the peasantry in the construction of a more sustainable and just agriculture in Brazil.

## **RESCUING WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE**

Nowadays, rural women have greater gender equality in agriculture, autonomy in the management of production units, freedom of expression, access to education and technologies, but this was not always the case. In the social movements that bring together and politically articulate rural women, regardless of the denominations assumed, there is a growth in the strategic importance of women in the constitution of a way of seeing and acting in agriculture intended for the future.

Likewise, in the experiences that involve the implementation of the fundamentals of Agroecology, the growth of women's participation brings to the field other visions of sustainability and management of agroecosystems. Innovations led by women farmers implement ecological practices that promote biodiversity, soil conservation, reduce the use of pesticides and promote greater production of food beneficial to health. (Carabajal et al., 2023).

According to (PAULILO, 2004), the double working hours attributed to women over the years have, in a contradictory way, been significantly accompanied by the devaluation of the so-called "invisible work". For the author, activities such as motherhood, household chores and care for the elderly are often related to "Women's Work" and, in turn, end up reinforcing the invisibility of women's work and perpetuating gender inequality.

In the mid-1980s, the Movement of Women Farmers (MMA) emerged in southern Brazil, with the objective of instructing rural women to take over the leadership of workers' unions. This initiative reflects the idea that "gender is a constitutive element of social relations founded on the perceived differences between the sexes, with gender being a primary way of giving meaning to power relations." (SCOTT, 1980). The MMA, by training women for leadership positions, challenged existing power structures and promoted a reconfiguration of social relations in the rural context.

According to Boni (2013), in the 1980s, different women's movements were consolidated in the states, in line with the emergence of various rural movements; among these, the Peasant Women's Movement (MMC) emerges.

For the MMC (Boni, 2013), rural women workers built their history through their organization and motivated by the banner of recognition of the valorization of rural women,

triggering struggles for women's liberation, for their unionization, documentation, social security rights (maternity pay, retirement), political participation, among others.

The MMC reports that with this process, the need for articulation with the women organized in the other mixed movements in the countryside was felt; the MMC mentions that in its trajectory, in 1995, it actively acted in the creation of the National Articulation of Women Rural Workers, bringing together women from the following movements: Autonomous Movements, Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), Pastoral of Rural Youth (PJR), Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), some Rural Workers' Unions and, more recently, the Small Farmers Movement (MPA).

According to the MMC (Boni, 2013), little by little, women's movements have been strengthened in the states, advancing in specific and general struggles, in the organization of the base, in the formation of leaders and in the understanding of the historical moment in which we live. From this reading and moved by the feeling of strengthening the struggle in defense of life, the autonomous women's movement began to be strengthened and unified to have expression on a national basis.

After various activities in grassroots, municipal and state groups, and with the celebration of the National Course (from September 21 to 24, 2003) in which 50 women from 14 states, representatives of the Autonomous Movements, participated, the concrete directions and the intended results were identified, and it was decided to call it: Peasant Women's Movement.

In these debates, the category of peasants is discussed, which includes the unit of rural production centered on the family nucleus, which, on the one hand, is dedicated to autonomous agricultural and artisanal production with the objective of satisfying the vital needs of the family; and, on the other hand, it sells part of its production to guarantee the necessary resources to acquire products and services that it does not produce.

## **BY WAY OF RESULTS: THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY AGRICULTURE**

Women, through their active participation in social movements in the countryside, have strengthened their protagonism and their role in changing gender relations, increasing equality between men and women. In this sense, previous works by the author allow us to observe the female empowerment of women in the context of the municipality of Itaquí,



identifying their greater participation in the management of family production units and in the decisions of the family nucleus. CARABAJAL and SILVEIRA (2022).

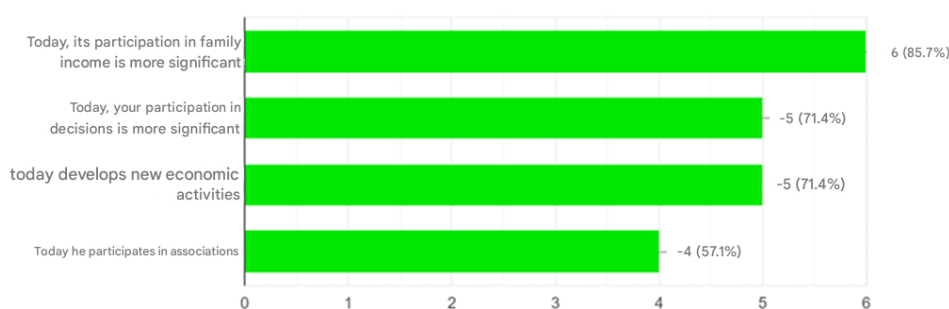
From the perspective of the interviewees, it can be seen in the following images.

In this image below, the perspective of women farmers in relation to family life is shown, showing the significant increase in their participation:

Image-1: Image of the graph of the participation of women

What do you notice in family life?

7 answers



Source: Carabajal (2022)

From the perspective of women farmers, there has been a change in the role of women, as shown below:

Image-2: Role of Women Farmers questionnaire

Do you think the role of women has changed in recent years; why?

7 answers

In my opinion, they continue working together, there have been no changes or modifications in relation to the role.

Yes

Due to the coordination of the service

Yes, because there were jobs helping to develop the fairs.

yes, most fair and women in meetings too

There are many women taking the lead, this is working

There have been a lot of changes, women are more involved and participating more

Source: Carabajal (2022)



In the spaces of dialogue with women at the South American meeting *Women and Agroecology*, the peasant women of the MMC differentiate the terms farmer and peasant; the women, in the interviews, emphasize that the peasant differs from the farmer, as they mention that: "in family farming, you can be integrated into the agro-industry, working in the family you can be an employee of another, working with the family can practice conventional agriculture aimed at the market". The term peasant for the interviewees is much broader: "peasant knows how to harvest the seed, knows when to plant, knows what to plant now, because he has his differential by the factor that he knows how to do it without needing the assistance of external professionals". From this perspective, peasants act on the basis of traditional knowledge, which is transmitted inter-generationally.

It should be noted that this difference between farmer and peasant implies that the characteristic of peasant agriculture is to maintain its autonomy based on Agri-culture, which was defined as the knowledge of the man who works the land (BALEM and SILVEIRA, 2000). Whereas in family farming, characterized by heterogeneity, there may be farmers who act in search of income and based on industrial inputs, which are recommended by scientific-technological knowledge. In other words, they can practice monocultures with intensive use of agrochemicals, meaning high environmental impact.

In the case of peasant agriculture, it is intended to preserve agroecosystems and, therefore, the knowledge of Agroecology makes a decisive contribution. In the interviews, the women emphasize that "we feel good, we are in contact with nature, with pure water, we can still take care of the springs". Also noteworthy are the statements that the way of life in peasant agriculture involves solidarity among peasants and the sharing of knowledge. The women of the MMC interviewed explained that their struggle is to produce healthy food without degrading the soil and polluting the waters. The increasingly clear environmental imbalances impose a need to rethink the way of doing agriculture, according to the interviewees.

In the interviews conducted with the women of Itaqui, the presence of practices based on traditional knowledge and a desire to minimize the use of industrial inputs, especially pesticides, was observed. But in the context in which they are inserted, the knowledge of agricultural modernization is an imposition of technical assistance and pressure from agents committed to capital-intensive agriculture. The women's dissatisfaction was perceived, but their feeling of impotence.

Image 3: First South Brazilian Meeting of Women and Agroecology



Source: Author (2024)

## IDENTIFYING PEASANT TRAITS

As already pointed out in the introduction, there are peasant traits that remain in contemporaneity; In this sense, the classic debate that confronts two perspectives: the prediction of the disappearance of the peasantry with the capitalist evolution of agriculture versus another vision that points to the maintenance of an agriculture based on the work-consumption balance. In this last perspective linked to Chayanov's work, insertion in the market occurs for the sale of surpluses, but does not change the organization of work and production, identifying the social reproduction of a "peasant" type of way of life.

In this work, we seek to demonstrate that in the contemporary scenario none of these perspectives can be seen as terminative. The permanence of peasant traits in contemporary agriculture is observed, but the transformations that have occurred are understandable. Two arguments can be explained as fundamental:

- a) the emergence of the concept of family farming in academia in the 1990s and the correspondence evidenced in social movements of this characterization of a certain segment of agriculture, seek to define a way of doing agriculture that involves diversity; In his characterization, he is in opposition to a large agriculture with salaried labor, heir to the maintenance and modernization of the latifundia. However, in this heterogeneity, very clear differentiations can be identified. In other words, this category of family farming does not exempt deeper analysis of ways of experiencing agriculture, considering the presence of different contexts.
- b) When talking about an agriculture with peasant traits, it is admitted that there have been processes of transformation over time, which present marked regional

differences. And the agriculture that is considered peasant represents a reaction to a model of so-called conventional agriculture, which identifies a form of production based on industrial inputs (mechanical, chemical and biological technologies). By proposing a differentiated model with a perspective of preservation of agroecosystems and based on the rescue of traditional knowledge, a "peasant" identity is created, which does not appear in many segments of family farming (an aspect that we explore in the discussion of empirical results).

But to synthesize our argument, we seek to highlight the peasant traits that were identified in the research materials. These traits are three:

- a) the type of exploitation of space, that is, the foundation used for the use of agrarian space; while in corporate agriculture (commonly called Agribusiness) or in segments of family farming with intensive and market-oriented production, the land is exploited to obtain the highest possible profit, it is conceived differently in peasant agriculture. The land is now seen with the objective of being preserved, ensuring that in the future it can continue to produce and more, maintaining a way of life integrated with nature (where it is not an object of domination and exploitation as in Cartesian and capitalist rationality).
- b) Market insertion is also a significant element in the analysis; In agriculture considered as peasant, production for the market is present, but the market is seen differentiated: values of solidarity are assumed, whether in relation to other farmers or consumers. The latter are intended to produce healthy foods that are produced in a way that has a lower environmental impact. In relation to farmers, peasant agriculture exercises the sharing of knowledge and the valorization of spatially situated knowledge, where Agroecology emerges as a guiding paradigm.
- c) The social reproduction of the family is a peasant trait present in agriculture currently called peasant, because the organization of production and the way of life follow this orientation; In many cases observed in family farming, the hegemonic rationality is aimed at maximizing profit or accumulating capital in the form of land assets. In the case of peasant agriculture, according to the propositions and definitions of the MMC, keeping the family in dignified conditions is an objective to be pursued. (BONI, 2013) Obviously, here is the risk reduction present and the search for cost-minimizing strategies, by adopting a reduction in the use of industrial inputs.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The work argues that in contemporary agriculture there are peasant traits, which are identified in the literature, in addition to being anchored in the empirical evidence found with the Peasant Women's Movement and in the face of the reality of a relatively marginalized family agriculture in the municipality of Itaqui-RS. In the exploration of the changes and permanences seen in agriculture, the protagonism of women is relevant, an element emphasized in our analysis.

It can be seen that the prevalence of a debate in the 1970s and 1980s in Brazil that mostly affirmed the inevitability of the disappearance of the peasantry, prevented the observation of the dynamic and plural character of the changes underway. When, in the 1990s, a definition of family farming emerged in academia and in the context of social movements as opposed to large-scale agriculture based on wage labor, a diversity of forms of organization of production and the preservation of peasant traits in certain cases were hidden in a broad concept.

Exploring this diversity allows us to lay bare characteristics of a so-called peasant agriculture and assumed by rural social movements as a model of opposition to the so-called Agribusiness. It should be noted that segments of family farming reproduce the ways of producing conventional agriculture, approaching a model that causes relevant environmental impacts and places the farmer in the position of an individual who reproduces technical recommendations, losing his autonomy. Starting from the critique of this dominant model, another proposal for thinking and acting in agriculture emerges.

The work was prepared to comply with the evaluation requirements of the curricular component "Family Agriculture and Peasantry" of the master's degree in Rural Extension at UFSM, presenting a set of elements that give rise to future investigations and raises questions to be considered as relevant in debates on Gender in agriculture, Agroecology and peasant agriculture.

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