

## **The lives of peasant and worker women and stories of documents in the central backwoods of Pernambuco**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article focuses on how peasant and worker women deal with norms and rules about birth, ageing and death, in the process of getting access to social rights, especially to Social Security. Our aim is to analyze difficulties and strategies used by women in order to comply with the legal demands of proof of work experience in family farming through civil and professional documents. Research was undertaken in the municipalities of Santa Cruz da Baixa Verde and Triunfo, in the Pernambuco Sertão in Northeast Brazil. Informants' lack of documents is revealing of the ways in which the parameters of modernity have been established within the nation. Thus, we see that the issue is intrinsically related to gender, class, race, ethnicity and geopolitical criteria.

**Key words:** Rural Worker; Women; Gender; Agriculture; Documents.

### **Introduction:**

Starting in 1982, women in the Central Backwoods of Pernambuco of Northeastern Brazil who worked in family farming began to join efforts in common interest, developing new ways of speech and and new connections, exchanges and links with each other and other social agents. Women organized through the Movement of Rural Women Workers from Central Pernambuco's Backwoods wanted to be seen as rural workers and demanded to participate in the decisions that affected their lives either in the public or private contexts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper summarizes a chapter of my doctoral thesis in Social Psychology intituled *Além das secas e das chuvas: os usos da nomeação rural women worker no Sertão de Pernambuco* (CORDEIRO, 2004).

Nonetheless, in their struggle for access to social and political rights, these women must confront institutional aspects of modernity that regulate their relationships, behaviour and work. For example, regarding the Social Security system, they are obliged to seek out different social institutions in order to uncover any kind of document that can show government and society that their lives have been dedicated to the hard work of sowing the dry land of Pernambuco every single day over the course of years. At this moment, they come up face to face with another kind of rationality, one which gives priority to written *proof, documents and legislation*. It is a type of rationality that has little to do with the daily lives of the poor and rural women of the Brazilian northeast.

The processes that regulate and normalize every day life can best be understood through the prism of the thought of Michel Foucault.<sup>2</sup> In his perspective, during the second half of the eighteenth century a new technology of power emerges. This technology, rather than excluding disciplinary power, takes it over, updates and partially adapts it. Rather than merely applied to the body, it deals with life itself, with the human being as species. It is meant to regulate processes like birth, death, fertilization, life span and diseases. He names this new technology of power the 'bio-politics' of the human specie. Bio-politics intervene and establish mechanisms to regulate the population and inaugurates new behaviours and concerns with life, health and hygiene. It deals with the population as a scientific, political and biological problem as well as one of power.

What is at stake here is not an interest in imposing discipline on all these processes, but to assure their regulation. Unlike disciplinary power, which targets the individual body in an attempt to train and render it docile, bio-power focuses on the population. This means 'intervention for the purposes of instilling life', in ways of life or 'how one should live' and how to live, in extending controls over life, accidents, coincidence and casuality.

Foucault analyzes the law as an element that is present in disciplinary and regulating mechanisms; it is applied over the bodies and the populations that are to be regulated. For this author, a normalized society is "a society in which, like an orthogonal articulation, disciplinary and regulatory norms cut across one another".<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I will focus on how the peasant women, when gaining access to social rights, then go on to deal with the norms and regulations that preside over processes of birth, death and ageing, particularly with those that pertain to the social security system. I will analyze the difficulties that these women face and the strategies they employ to provide legal evidence of their work in family farming through civil and professional documents .

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<sup>2</sup> FOUCAULT, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> FOUCAULT, 2005, p. 302.

### **The women who participated in this study and their context.**

The study was carried out from 2001 to 2003 as doctoral research in Social Psychology. In addition to ethnographic observations, I have also referred to parts of interviews that I conducted with 14 women peasants.<sup>4</sup>

My interviewees are women from 22 to 59 years old and the majority of them are of Afro-Brazilian descent. Five are single, two separated and seven married, and have, on the average, between one and three children. There was, however, one woman who had fifteen children and another one with ten.

With regard to educational level, two women out of six in the 50 to 59 age group had only finished the 4<sup>th</sup> grade of elementary school. The others had not completed more than three years of primary instructing. In other age groups, eight farmer workers between 29 and 39 years old have a slightly higher educational level, from about six and eight years. Only two of them finished secondary school, which in Brazil finishes at 11th grade. One of them, president of Sindicato de Trabalhadores Rurais (Rural Workers Trade Union), is currently in college.

Our interviewees work within the system of small-scale family farming. Their most important crops are beans, corn and tapioca. It is basically agricultural work geared toward immediate family consumption; it is excessively hard work that is carried out in poor conditions. With one exception, none of our informants had any regular access to cash income other than that provided through government-run income transfer programs or social security benefits.

They are inhabitants of Triunfo and Santa Cruz da Baixa Verde, two towns located in the state of Pernambuco, in the backwoods. In Pernambuco, the backlands make up about 63.7% of its territory. According to the data of a survey from 2000, the total population in this area was 1,377,586 inhabitants with 44.2% living in rural zones.

Of the 15,135 inhabitants in the town of Triunfo, 57.84% of them live in the rural area. In Santa Cruz da Baixa Verde there are 10,893 inhabitants, of whom 61.93% live in rural areas. These towns are different from others also located in the backwoods insofar as they are set in a marshland at an altitude that provides a mild climate and more frequent rainfall. Population density is high and small landowners prevail. Consequently, anyone holding 10 hectares of land there is considered a large landowner.

The Backwoods is an area with heterogeneous characteristics and with a high level of social inequality. Also, the absence of sustainable development policies for this semi-barren area aimed at

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<sup>4</sup> Before each interview I explained the objectives and procedures used in the research. Also, I asked the person to read the term of consent and reassured her that no information that would reveal her identity would be included. For those women who were illiterate, I read the term of consent to them. The interview began only after reading and signing this agreement. All names used in this article are fictitious.

combating exclusion and creating local economic alternatives condemns its poor population living on subsistence agriculture to extremely poor living conditions which get worse in periods of drought.

### **Life Stories and Documents Stories**

Nowadays, in Brazilian rural areas, there are many factors that pressure women to provide their personal documentation as well as that of their children: to provide access to social security, public hospitals and public schools; to be included in social programs such as income transfer, land reform and support for family farming; travel; to participate in Catholic Church ceremonies, such as baptism and weddings. As Isadora put it, “[...] nowadays nothing can be gotten without papers; not even the dead can be buried without papers.”

*To die and not be buried because you don't have the papers* was the observation repeated by people in Jatiúca during those days of March 2002. Isadora and the other inhabitants of Jatiúca<sup>5</sup> were shocked. A man who lived there felt ill and was taken to Recife where he died. The person who had accompanied him forgot to pick up the death certificate. The man's family tried to bury him in three different towns, to no avail. It took a judge's authorization to finally be able to bury him. At the time, this story became the greatest matter of talk around the town. Every once in a while a new case would come up or follow the trials and tribulations of families running from one place to another in order to bury someone. Sad and thoughtful, people said to me that this was *all on the account of papers*.

Isadora had also gone through a similar experience: one of her children had died and she had difficulties in burying the child because he did not have a birth certificate. Furthermore, she had to provide all her children's birth registration when the Catholic Church started to demand the certificates in order to baptize children. Her fear that they would “live or die as pagans” encouraged her to get the documents done.

The story of Isadora's search for papers is entangled with the rest of her life history. She got her birth certificate when she was 18; not long after that, with the help of a local official, got her voter's registration. Her marriage both at the courthouse and the church provided her with a new document, her marriage certificate. For many years Isadora did not find it necessary to have any other kind of document. In 1989, when she was pregnant, she had to be admitted to hospital urgently and the hospital demanded her work papers (a passport-type booklet that documents a person's employment history). From her work on the “emergency front”<sup>6</sup> (1983, 1993, 1999) she has acquired the pay slips that someone once told her were important to keep. In 2002, during the period that our interview took place, Isadora was busy getting other documents together (social security number, ID, Trade Union membership and a new voting registration card). I asked her why she was getting them just at that

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<sup>5</sup> District of the town of Santa Cruz da Baixa Verde, Pernambuco backwoods.

<sup>6</sup> Emergency programs developed by the federal government during the high dry periods in the Northeast.

moment, with retirement prospects only 5 years down the road. She replied that Social Security did not want new documents, but old ones.

Like Isadora, of the 14 women we interviewed, nearly all of them only got papers when a specific need to have them arose. Some of them who are in their fifties today got their first papers (birth certificate) only at age 18. Not long afterwards they got their voter's registration card and went on to gradually put together other needed documentation.

Many of them put their documents together with the aid of a local politician or electoral campaign official who was also a family friend. This enabled the family to dispense with the fees, transport expenses and red tape involved in getting these documents. Local politicians or electoral campaign workers made it easier for the woman to get her papers together, while she and her family would assume a commitment to vote for a particular candidate. This type of situation still persists today and contributes to the maintenance of "clientelist politics" in the country.

Among the women in their fifties, there is Julieta who barely manages to write her name and has no documents, not even a birth certificate from the church<sup>7</sup>. For this reason she was not able to register the birth of her son, registered in her sister's name. Julieta rarely leaves the house, has never been to school and she has been to a doctor only once in her life.

However, it is not only the older women who confront this lack of documentation. I met Sônia in Jatiúca after being told that she need police authorization to leave the maternity ward her son, given her lack of documents. Sônia is 22 years old and although she attended school until the seventh grade, was never legitimately enrolled. She has two children who do not have birth certificates because she herself does not have one. Her children are seen by the local GP in the same way she studied: with no registration. Since she was born in another municipality, she said that could not afford to try to get the birth certificate given by the church. She feels sorry for her children who are experiencing the same situation. Sônia says that for her country, *she is a non-entity*.

In Brazil, military registration is mandatory for men when they are 18, which means they obtain civil documents earlier than women. Also, in the rural areas, given the frequency of migration from one region to another, men have more documentation than women. Frequent trips to the southeast of the country in the search for work were an important factor encouraging men to obtain their documentation. Whoever went to Sao Paulo or to Rio de Janeiro knew that in addition to the voter's registration and military service papers, identity and working papers would also be required.

There are women who have documentation, though under different names, though. For example, it is not uncommon to be known by one name and have documents with another one, or even be called by two different names. This is a result of parental conflicts over children's name. In cases of disagreement, it is usually the father who has the power to register children at the registry office,

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<sup>7</sup> Birth certificate provided by the Catholic Church. It is one of the resources used by the Rural Workers Trade Union (Sindicatos de Trabalhadores Rurais (STRs) e MMTR). When women do not have documents this certificate becomes the main document that is then used to permit the acquisition of the others.

and therefore he may do as he wishes. Yet the child's mother may continue to call her son or daughter by the name she has chosen. Thus, we found men and women who had been living for years under two different names. We also found a large variety of surnames. In many cases of conflict, which were sometimes due to matters of land inheritance, disappointed parents decided to break off family ties with one of them and not to baptize the children with the family surname. I found women with completely different surnames from the rest of their family. Thus, since many women only got papers after reaching adulthood, not all papers are consistent in terms of names, which makes it difficult or even impossible to exercise certain social rights. The rural women workers reported that birth certificates are sometimes obtained through politicians or registrars who do not always take parents' desire into account when registering their children – this includes information on the sex of the child. Given the high illiteracy rates that prevail in the countryside, data may not even be checked. In some cases, names have been spelled in ways that have little to do with the given name. It was the registrar's job to register the information as he or she understood it. I encountered a young woman who, because of her given name, had been registered as a male. Her family only noticed this mistake years later when she was already a teenager. When I mentioned this over the course of a conversation with another female inhabitant of the region, she related experiences from her own family. The registrar was her father's friend. When a child was born, the registrar would visit the family and ask the child's name, so that he could then go on to then register the child himself. This however caused some confusion. A mother's name was changed, from Ligia to Eligia; some children have their mother's surname and others have the father's, and there are also some children whose surnames belong neither to the mother nor to the father.

Nowadays, faced with the need for papers stating their occupation as farm worker, women have begun to develop new strategies. One of them involves acquiring new documents saying they are farm workers. Another involves filling out application forms and registering with schools, doctors and hospitals. They have become more aware and have more control over the process of filling out application and registration forms. When I was talking to a female health agent from Jatiúca, she told me: 'when I ask a person what their occupation is, everybody says 'farm worker'. Women ask me to put down farm worker because as a domestic worker they aren't entitled to retirement benefits. No one wants to be listed as a domestic or a housewife any longer.'<sup>8</sup>

### **When documents silence female work in the family farming**

Generally speaking, it seems to me that it has been easier for women to acquire papers stating 'rural worker' as their occupation from places that are already "feminized" (schools, GPs and hospitals) than furthering changes in the use of landed property in the family or in the community.

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from my field notes, June 16th, 2002.

### **When documents make women's work in family farming invisible.**

Generally speaking, it seems to me that it has been easier for women to acquire documents with their profession listed as rural workers when resorting to places that are already taken as feminine (schools, GPs, hospitals) than it has been to foment changes in the use of land property in the family or in the community.

When analyzing the research that the Movement of Women Rural Workers of the Northeast (*Movimento de Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais do Nordeste* (MMTR-NE) carried out on the document situation for rural women workers, a substantial difference between personal documents and those related to farm work emerged.<sup>9</sup> 3,071 women were researched in 25 towns of eight different states of the Northeast: 83% have voter registration cards; 75% have a birth certificate; 74% have an identity card; and 54% have a Social Security number (CPF). Yet regarding matters related to the land, its use and possession, only 3% have a leasing contract; 5.8% have a land property document; 18% have an INCRA receipt (institution that legalizes the property of land in Brazil); 2.5% have a “*bloco de produtora*.”

This lack of documentation on landed property is testimony of women's exclusion from rights to the land. Among the fourteen women I interviewed, I found two prevalent situations: there are few women who are landowners, with land usually belonging to male members of the family (father, husband, father-in-law, and brother); in cases in which women do own the land, they do not have supporting documents. Among the three women landowners who I interviewed, only one had a land title. It is also important to mention that two of them had inherited the land from their mothers (there were no men in the family) and the other one got the land from an aunt.

In the two towns where my research was carried out, land acquisition customarily occurs in two different ways: through inheritance or purchase. Usually the ‘inherited land’<sup>10</sup> is not regularized because its impending division could generate considerable family conflict. Isadora's story is a good example of this: when her parents got married, her father had no land and they lived on a farm that her mother had inherited. Since her father later re-married, the land was passed on to her step-mother and her children. There was never a legal division and Isadora does not know much about the legal situation of the land.

When the ‘land is bought’, sometimes the family has the receipt of the purchase although they do not have the property title (or deed, as they are call it in rural areas). It is worth mentioning that to regularize the land requires money – deeds, declarations, photocopies and transportation – that workers cannot afford.

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<sup>9</sup> MMTR-NE et al., 2003.

<sup>10</sup> On the complex issue of gender and property inheritance, see Maria José CARNEIRO, 2001, and Maria Ignez S. PAULILO, 2003.

In their study on women's empowerment and rights to land and property in Latin America, Carmen Deere and Magdalena León<sup>11</sup> state that despite legal progress, Latin American women are still much less likely to have their own land than the men. Even when they do have land, their properties are smaller. The authors emphasize that if land possession is shared by a group (in the case of peasants and indigenous people), traditional habits and customs tend to discriminate against women, causing the majority to lose permanent rights to the land. Yet the authors also argue that if women own land and other forms of property, this enhances their capacity to bargain not only within the family but also in the community and in wider society.

Referring to the inheritance of land by women, in South of Brazil, Maria Ignez Paulilo<sup>12</sup> assures that there is a higher probability of male children becoming heirs to the land. Where it is necessary to exclude someone, women are the first to be chosen. Furthermore, when the land belongs to the woman through inheritance, her husband becomes responsible for it. Women's access to the land also occurs when they get married to men who already own a tract of land. The author emphasizes however that women themselves hardly ever make reference to this situation.<sup>13</sup>

The same kind of situation also appears in agrarian reform settlement communities. Maria da Graças Rua and Miriam Abramovay<sup>14</sup> point out that there is no formal legal obstruction for women's recognition as landholders yet most paper work or contracts are written up in the man's name. Women and children are listed as dependents.

It is very common in Pernambuco's backwoods for the farm worker who does not have land to end up planting in a relative's or friend's property and the payment is done in species, that is, receiving a part of what is produced.<sup>15</sup> This kind of arrangement is made orally and lasts until the harvest. The following year, the partner or the *meeiro* (the person who plants on someone else's property and shares the production) can either continue planting on the land or may go on to make a deal with another land owner. It is also very common for the children to start a family and keep living and working on a parent's property; thus, they do not need to regularize the situation and use of the land. Of the fourteen women I interviewed, five are living in this kind of condition.

Usually these kinds of deals are made among men. Women are not usually included in decisions regarding the use of the land. I have seen many women coming to the Trade Union saying that they worked for many years as *meeiras* or partners but they did not have any document to prove it. They have to go back to the land looking for the former landowners and, if they are found, request a

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<sup>11</sup> DEERE and LEON, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> PAULILO, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> There are little work on gender and property inheritance in Brazil. Referring to the rural area, DEERE and LEON, 2002, emphasize that a large part of their work was done in South of Brazil.

<sup>14</sup> RUA e ABRAMOVAY, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> It may be a half or a third of the production. There are a wide variety of deals and forms of payments.



declaration stating that such a work relationship actually existed. On occasion they are not able to find the former landowners anymore or they refuse to give them such information.<sup>16</sup>

Another frequent form of work is referred to as ‘rented out’ (‘trabalho de alugado’). This refers to a kind of arrangement in which the person works for someone two or three days a week over a certain period of time and earns daily wages<sup>17</sup> but without any contract between the worker and the contracting party. This usually occurs in the land cleaning or planting periods. Such is Isadora’s situation. Although she has worked for several years as a “rented worker” she has no documents to prove it.

## **Final Reflections**

From the end of the 1980s, when rural women won social rights and social policies were directed toward municipalities, rural women began to deal more directly with legal demands and civil and occupational documents in order to gain access to social programs and policies. However, women farm workers’ lack of documentation was only made visibly recognizable after some reports, demands and organized campaigning from the women rural workers in the 1990’s. A landmark in this fight was in 1997, when The National Articulation of Women Rural Workers (ANMTR) released their National Campaign for Documentation which they named: ‘No Woman without Documentation’. In the Northeast, the documentation campaign was organized by MMTR-NE. In 2003, the Federal Government launched the National Program of Documentation for woman workers that ensures free provision of documents for women farm workers.

Generally in Pernambuco’s backwoods, men and women from the poorest sectors of the rural population do not have many civil and occupational documents. Nonetheless, this should not be understood as an individual problem of lack of responsibility or as a numeric variable that characterizes rural poverty. As I understand it, the lack of documentation reveals how the parameters of modern life in Brazil have been set up: through exclusion of the impoverished population and the different modes of subordination that correspond to gender, race, ethnic group and geopolitical location. Lack of documentation worsens material and social deprivation and is responsible for great suffering and the humiliation that women are subjected to when facing the institutional mechanisms that regulate births, pregnancy, lifespan and deaths. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasizing here that women do not accept these mechanisms passively; they resist, they make demands, they find ways to deal with circumstances and create strategies to change them.

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<sup>16</sup> Article 57/2002 of the National Social Security Code states that if a land owner has a partner or a *meeiro* he will not be awarded special retirement benefits.

<sup>17</sup> During the period in which this research was carried out, payment rates were R\$ 5,00 a day.

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