

## Care work and rurality in coffee growing in Caldas: the case of the "alimentadoras"

Trabajo de cuidado y ruralidad en la caficultura caldense: el caso de las "alimentadoras"

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### ABSTRACT

This presentation, show the results of the research about the work of rural women that cook meals on farms and coffee plantations in the rural area of three municipalities belonging to the south-central region of Caldas (Colombia). The purpose of this research is the understanding of the situations of labor invisibility that surrounds the activity of preparing and supplying meals in the context of rural coffee work. The work methodology and the way in which the data is constructed and analyzed, mainly focused on narratives derived from the life stories of the participants, reveal the conditions of gender segregation, inequity in access and use of resources, and wage inequality in terms of economic remuneration, but also how this work is configured as an essential issue for production and maintenance of the labor force, social relations, and productivity of coffee companies.

**Keywords:** Rural women; coffee; women's work; social justice; food preparation, care work

## RESUMEN

La presente ponencia recoge los resultados de investigación sobre la labor que realizan las mujeres rurales “alimentadoras”, en fincas y haciendas cafeteras de la zona rural de tres municipios pertenecientes a la subregión centro sur de Caldas (Colombia). El propósito de la investigación se encamina hacia la comprensión de las situaciones de invisibilidad laboral que rodea la actividad de preparación y suministro de comidas para jornaleros cafeteros. La metodología mixta de trabajo, centrada en narrativas, revelaron las condiciones de segregación por aspectos de género, inequidad en acceso y uso de recursos, precariedad salarial para las alimentadoras, demostrando como su trabajo se configura en un asunto esencial de para el cuidado, la producción y mantenimiento de fuerza de trabajo, las relaciones sociales, y la productividad de las empresas cafeteras.

**Palabras clave:** Mujer rural; café; trabajo de las mujeres; justicia social; preparación de alimentos, trabajo de cuidado

## 1. Introduction

The coffee plantation is historically conceived from its beginnings as the nucleus where the coffee industry is consolidated in the country, and they are an insignia element of the labor and family tradition of coffee growing, since in them the culture of administrators and workers was founded and socialized (Acevedo, 2008). One of the characteristics of this culture is to provide permanent or temporary food and housing conditions to the day laborers that come and go through the coffee growing territories, according to the rhythm of the harvests. The importance of good nutrition in the coffee plantation lies in the fact that this is a determining factor in the game of supply and demand of the labor market for the harvest, a criterion used by agricultural workers to choose where to work; the manual character of this labor and the migratory nature of this population affect the productivity of the company if this condition is not fulfilled. For example, in some studies (Duque, 2000; Arango, 2014), it was found that good food (25.6%) and good treatment (22.1%) are the factors that had greater weight against criteria such as price and production to choose a farm where to pick coffee.

The term "feeder" (Errazuriz, 1986; Arango, 2014; Tobasura 1992) is widely used in the Haciendas to refer to rural workers dedicated to offer meals to day laborers who seek their livelihood in these places, however, it is understood that this is an activity carried out directly by women and not by the men "Feeders", who ultimately receive a higher degree of economic recognition; in fact, for their hiring, this worker must be accompanied by a woman (mother, sister, wife, daughter, etc.) who are in charge not only of cleaning the house and the lodgings, but also of preparing meals for their families

and those of the other rural workers, without this representing economic retribution, business recognition, and with longer working days than those of other trades.

This research was carried out during the coffee harvests of 2017 and 2018, in the rural area of three municipalities belonging to the south-central sub-region of Caldas. The techniques used followed the guidelines of the mixed work prospective (Qualitative/quantitative) focused on life stories of these women dedicated to the trade of cooking. The objectives were: to determine their life experiences, to describe the contributions of their work, and to value the two perspectives in terms of coffee production activity.

As a result, it was determined that the low social valuation of care work (specifically cooking) shows that women feeders are an invisible labor force both from an economic and social point of view, since food is a factor that generates value in favor of businessmen, at the expense of the unpaid work of rural women, despite the fact that they are the ones who guarantee the conditions of well-being and care for those in charge of the coffee harvest.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in Latin America and the Caribbean the rural population amounts to 121 million people, which corresponds to 20% of the total, of this 48% are rural women (Ballara, Damianovic, & Parada, 2010 p.7). In Colombia, data from the National Census indicate that for the year 2016 the rural population represents 23.4% of the total population of the country, which is equivalent to 11,406,962 inhabitants, of this group 5,381,678 are rural women, i.e. 47.1% (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2017, p. 4); the above denotes that the participation of rural women within the local and regional economy is essential, not only as key agents for food production, food security and family subsistence (Ballara, Damianovic & Parada, 2010, p. 7), but also for the defense of territories, biodiversity, the transmission of knowledge and know-how, and the socioeconomic and cultural maintenance of communities (Nobre, Hora, Brito, & Parada, 2017, p. 2).

Despite these situations, the contributions of rural women become a fundamental part of sustaining the economic system, since many of their tasks, although not necessarily associated with any monetary or social value, generate wealth for their beneficiaries and are understood as an extension of the roles that have historically been assigned to women (Ballara et al., 2010, p. 20), contributions that continue to be invisible.

The invisibility of rural women's work is one of the critical aspects of gender inequality in Latin American countries (ECLAC, 2019). The results of time use surveys in the region reveal that most rural women are invisible to official statistics because they

appear as an inactive population in the measurement of formal employment, which corroborates that rural women perform multiple activities that are considered invisible work, since they participate in unpaid work or produce for household self-consumption (ECLAC, 2019, p.41), such work is aimed at caring for gardens and animals, gathering, processing and cooking food, caring for children and the elderly, in average workdays of twelve hours (Ballara, Damianovic, & Parada, 2010, p. 7). These tasks rather than characterizing a job that implies, laboriousness, knowledge, qualities and skills, at the same time is preceded by exploitation and labor segregation, which results in precarious, poorly paid jobs with little access to training; despite the fact that a large part of the population of rural women in Latin America live in these conditions, they represent 20% of the agricultural labor force (Nobre, Hora, Brito, & Parada, 2017, p. 1).

The nature of rural women's work, and in particular of the object of study of the present research (the work of the women feeders), has as a background a labor context framed in conditions of invisibilization, resulting in segregation, inequity and precariousness. A job that overlaps the productive, reproductive and care spheres in borders that are barely perceptible to each other, because being a job that generates economic returns and welfare to members of society (and therefore susceptible to remuneration), it is inserted in the sphere of the home without being able to escape from domestic chores. As described so far, the work of women feeders is not only focused on the provision of food, it is also the sum of activities aimed at the reproduction of life, socially and culturally assigned to women, which is the reason for their invisibility. Against this background, the following research questions arise: What are the situations of invisibility that surround their work? What are the implications of this situation on their living conditions? How does the ideology that accompanies these situations operate? What are the economic, social, cultural and emotional contributions they make to coffee growing?

In rural areas, reproductive and care work inherent to the creation of the labor force and necessary for the sustainability of societies are historically assigned to women, but in many cases, if rural women perform productive work aimed at the creation of wealth, this may be recognized as reproductive, especially for those tasks that they perform in the home. This lack of clarity in many cases prevents a correct analysis of the nature of rural women's work, distinguishing a "gray" zone between the productive and the reproductive; in the same way, work, as a category of analysis, is studied fundamentally from those who incorporate formal or salaried employment into the market, leaving out work that is foreign, hidden and invisible in the commercial sphere.

In relation to the above, this research is based on the need to understand, from the subjectivity of the women feeders, the experiences, expectations, evaluations, and at the same time the situations that objectively accompany their work (practices, relationships, and living conditions), bearing in mind that the invisibilization of work considered part of the domestic sphere is a condition common to all women, but in the case of rural women it is even more so because agricultural or productive activities are carried out within the home, and sometimes they themselves do not perceive them as work and economic contribution to the household (Diaz, 2002, p. 28). 28).

The results obtained with this research, first, are aimed at describing and analyzing the nature and contributions that the work of women, and particularly the women feeders, make to rural societies; second, they highlight the importance of their work as a factor of social cohesion, that is, in relation to how it is materialized not only in food, but also in the links and exchanges that are woven around it; third, they contribute new knowledge and debates on the work done by rural women, understanding their characteristics and particularities; and fourth, they highlight the importance of their work, especially when they are a silent part of agricultural production sites, with a view to formulating program plans that contribute to the improvement of their quality of life.

**Objectives:** In accordance with the above, the general objective of this study is to understand the situations of invisibility (segregation, inequity and precariousness) that surround the work of female feeders in coffee growing in the south-central sub-region of Caldas, and as specific objectives: To investigate from the perspective of the female feeders, the life experiences related to their situation of labor invisibility, to describe the economic, social, affective and cultural factors that accompany their work in the coffee companies, and to analyze the experiences and factors that accompany the work of the female feeders, and their relationship with coffee growing in the study region.

**Let's talk about care.** In the mid-twentieth century, the centrality of the discussions made by feminists (especially Marxist) about the relationship between capitalism and sexual division of labor, were focused on the role of women in the economy under an economic system that excludes women from the market sphere, placing them in the domestic space, only as beneficiaries of it (Esquivel, 2011, p. 12). 12), based on these ideas, the consequent division of social and economic life between production and reproduction, and the idea of domestic work as a requirement of capitalism (p. 12), inaugurates a new current of thought (Esquivel, 2011, p. 12).), inaugurates a new current of thought based on the need to approach the economy from a vision different from the mercantile one, and which places factors such as welfare and inequality at the center of the debate.

This is how Feminist Economics was born in the early nineties of the twentieth century from the Annual Conference of the American Economic Association, which includes for the first time a panel with a feminist theme in economics (Carrasco, 2006, p. 3), one of its repercussions was the creation of the International Association For Feminist Economics (IAFFE) in 1992, with its journal *Feminist Economics*, which has been published since 1995 (Carrasco, 2006; Franco, 2015). For Esquivel (2012), the thematic addressed by this current of thought is given by: the incorporation of unpaid domestic and care work in the economic sphere as a cornerstone of the same, understanding that the relationships cross policies, institutions and regulations are not gender-neutral, in addition to contributing to the identification of the multiple dimensions of inequality that interact with the same (Esquivel, 2012, p. 29). On the other hand, Carrasco (2006), alluding to the positions of second wave feminists adds: the criticism of classical economic thought, for not considering women's work in their studies, implies rethinking the concept of work, the characteristics and functions of domestic work, the participation of women in the sphere of the labor market, and its forms of discrimination, invisibilization, and marginalization that accompany it (p.4).

Subsequent debates suggest that the concept of reproductive work does not differ from domestic work (Esquivel, 2011, p. 12) since both originate from the division between "home and work", i.e. in the separation of productive processes linked to the capital market, and the tasks of reproduction of labor force in the domestic sphere (Esquivel, Faur & Jelin, 2012, p.14), the inseparable union between the reproductive and domestic spheres is evidenced by the fact that domestic work is seen as an integral part of the daily life of the household. From this point of view, domestic work is understood as the set of habitual and repetitive tasks that ensure social reproduction in three senses: biological reproduction (associated with fertility), daily reproduction (tasks aimed at the subsistence of family members, and the labor force of salaried workers), and social reproduction (transmission of social norms and values) (Esquivel, Faur & Jelin, 2012, p. 16-17), from these distinctions, the attention in the studies on this field changes to focus on making visible "the costs" that this work brought to women (Esquivel, 2011, p. 12).

In recent decades, and in order to bring to light other types of contributions to the economy, discourses on this subject have been divided into three lines of study: domestic or reproductive work, domestic economy and care work (Franco, 2015, p. 44). Care, understood as a challenge to the principles of economy and social construction (Alberti, Zavala, Salcido, & Real, 2014), represents a key element for the analysis of

feeder work; a fact that is rescued here is that rural workers depend on third parties for their food, remaining in a constant state of food insecurity (Arango, 2014). Care work can be carried out in the domestic environment, and may be unpaid, but this is not always the case. It is defined in the field of human relations, since it implies that a person develops tasks that contribute to the physical and emotional well-being of others (Franco, 2015), however, the domestic chores that accompany this work carry costs, not only monetary, but also in the use of time, resources and energy, and usually and not in all cases, this cost is borne by women; hence the unity that care (or care work) forms with domestic work; in more precise words Esquivel points out: 'providing care is (very) costly, but the costs of providing care are unequally shared between men and women within households, between households and in society in general' (Esquivel, 2015, p. 66).

With respect to care work, for Esquivel (2015) there are several conceptualizations that change in meaning according to different currents of thought, the first consideration is that care encompasses a broader meaning and is sometimes used as a synonym of the expression "care work", second, Feminist Economics adopts the term "care economy" to highlight the centrality that this has to sustain the market economy, on the other hand in sociological analyses and specifically public policy analyses, this term is recognized as "social organization of care" and "care regime" to make criticisms about the role of the state in these matters (Esquivel, 2015, p. 63-64). One concept of care that is related to what is presented in this study is extracted from Daly & Lewis (2000):

Care as a category of analysis is understood as those activities and relationships aimed at meeting the physical and emotional needs of children and dependent adults, and the social and economic normative frameworks within which these are assigned and carried out (Daly & Lewis, 2000, p. 285).

This suggests two things, that care work should be considered outside the domestic sphere, and secondly that it may or may not be invisible, i.e. it can also be performed in the market sphere (Franco, 2015, p. 47). Other definitions of care work related to feeder work, point to it first as a right and then as a value-generating activity (Osorio, 2015). These tasks are governed by the subjective, emotions and affective ties, more for love than for money; they are activities that -in the reality of many societies- should not be remunerated, and that also fall on women (Rocha & Ochoa, 2011), therefore, due to social, economic, labor, and political factors that foster the idea that their work of caring is natural, in unequal use of time, and sometimes their work is not done voluntarily,



imaginaries that in rural areas tend to be more deeply rooted and opportunities for women are scarcer (Peña & Uribe, 2013).

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This research was carried out in the rural zone of three municipalities of the south-central sub-region of the Department of Caldas, between the municipalities of Manizales, Chinchiná and Palestina. Likewise, a large part of the area of these municipalities is located within the territory recognized by UNESCO as the Coffee Cultural Landscape of Colombia (PCC), an area that has traditionally been the driving force behind the country's coffee productivity, This is due in part to the good management of the plantations by the producers, reflected in annual crop renewal practices, high planting densities, the adoption of disease resistant varieties, soil conservation practices and the technification of post-harvest processes, which has given the department its position as one of the main coffee producers in the country.

The research was supported by a Nested or Concurrent Design of the Dominant Model (DIAC), typical of mixed research (quantitative + qualitative), where one of the perspectives becomes the guide of the study, and the other is incorporated in one or more of its phases (Hernández, Collado, & Baptista, 2010, p. 571).

From the qualitative point of view (QUAL), and in order to ensure that the reality reconstructed in this research is a "faithful copy" of that lived and witnessed by the feeders, the analytical-interpretative perspective was used, as well as tools derived from the biographical narrative approach (life stories). Accordingly, the systematic design of the categories for the analysis of the narratives began with the elaboration of matrices in an Excel spreadsheet, which provided guiding criteria that were included in semi-structured interviews. The narratives were subjected to grounded theory tools, first with open coding and later with axial coding, so that the data were organized according to the type of question corresponding to each criterion in the matrix, then the codes were grouped according to their nature.

## **3. Results**

Finally, a relational reading was made between the categories resulting from each of the groupings, with previous theoretical categories (theoretical triangulation), the reason for resorting to this technique is to guarantee the viability and reliability of the data by filling in the gaps left in the analysis. However, the main disadvantage of establishing prior theoretical categories for data analysis, as proposed by the systematic design, is that the results run the risk of responding to the subjective expectations of the researcher



and end up silencing the voices of the participants. To correct this error, the data were again reviewed and analyzed in the light of grounded theory as proposed by Strauss & Corbin, (2002), in order to emphasize the analysis of emerging categories.

The collection of the narratives began in the month of October 2017 and culminated in June 2018, however to enrich the data and account for the experiences narrated by the feeders, a participant observation exercise was used, in order to evidence food practices related to the preparation and consumption, this exercise was carried out during a work week in the month of October 2018, a time when the coffee harvest began in this central area of Colombia. The resulting data were also triangulated together with the analysis of the narratives.

From the quantitative point of view (quan), 12 rural women identified as feeders participated in the narratives; in terms of representativeness, the sample design at first obeyed an estimate of 163 farms considered as "large coffee property" or business economy in the central-south subregion of Caldas, from this point it was established that each productive unit had at least one camp where rural workers are fed, for this reason the dependent variable to be considered in the study was defined in a feeder/business. The sample was calculated with the application of statistical tool for known population (Aguilar - Barojas, 2015). Criteria of homogeneity in cultivated areas and productivity levels among the total population of business-type farms in the study area were used. However, at the beginning of the fieldwork it became evident that coffee growing is not homogeneous, and that there are other realities that need to be incorporated into the study; for this reason, we worked with feeders who live and work in productive environments other than the farm system; the sampling for this was simple random (not probabilistic, but representative). The semi-structured interviews included quantitative variables such as age, length of experience, number of household members and diners to be served in the camps, as well as economic variables that inquired about the level of income of the feeders; it should be remembered that the guiding questions corresponded to the "structure" created from the theoretical categories, and left a place for open-ended questions. At the end of the fieldwork, the sample offered a panorama of the economic structure of coffee in the study zone: Nine of the feeders were linked to the hacienda system, one of them to the medium property, and two of them represented the smallholder coffee economies, all of them living together with their families at the time of being interviewed, on an equal number of properties. In accordance with these ideas, the criteria for selecting the participants changed from initially obeying the parameters of productive contexts (homogeneity), to taking into consideration the diversity of forms under which these women live within coffee growing.

## 4. Conclusions

The situations of invisibility that surround the care work performed by the women feeders and that were identified from their life experiences are the following:

a) Labor segregation: The permanent state of inequality of women feeders depends above all on decisions made within the family, between those who hold economic power (salary) and those who benefit from it, corroborating the fact that gender relations are configured in power relations. These relationships are often unequal because they not only respond to culturally established patterns, but also because these roles also correspond to the needs of the economic system, especially for the maintenance and repair of the labor force in care work such as feeding.

b) There is legal inequality for the feeders, since the socio-economic practices implicit in the relationship between the rural proletarian family and the companies identified as hidden contracting, revealed an imposition of servitude on the feeders in favor of the interests of more privileged social sectors.

c) The work of the women feeders is invisible because their work is related to domestic chores and is not valued as work that generates value. This work of feeding workers implies the performance of tasks that are not only related to the preparation of meals, but are also aimed at guaranteeing the well-being of people who come to the business organizations seeking economic sustenance and good treatment. This corroborates the double or triple workday that overlaps in the daily life of rural women and that the National Accounts System shows in work that is not only aimed at guaranteeing the well-being of the family nucleus and community well-being, but also at sustaining the economic system as a whole in much longer workdays than in other jobs, even taking up rest time. The average working day was estimated at 17 hours/day for women feeders, compared to 13.24 hours/day for rural women in general.

d) Wage precariousness is another of the conditions of the invisible work of the women feeders, which is revealed through the non-payment of wages; hence, practices such as monopolization and deprivation of resources by men are common; likewise, although some of the women feeders express economic independence by the fact of receiving resources through negotiation with their husbands or on their own account, the devaluation that accompanies their work is transversal, in the way they configure their place in the organizations and in work subordinated to specific schedules and tasks; The

result of this false autonomy of the feeders are the strategies of income or differentiated payments for the sale of food and commissary as the only way to receive monetary resources, which depend on the negotiation that occurs within the couple of husbands, and escapes all regulations on legal issues, where they do not reflect the full value of the effort and time invested in the mission entrusted to them.

The implications of these situations on the living conditions of the feeders are mainly the result of forced labor, which is materialized through decisions made within the family. For many of them, the involuntary nature of their work, or false autonomy as can be seen in others, leads to health problems (chronic fatigue, COPD, stress, accidents in the kitchen), loss of time to enjoy rest, socialization, cultural and leisure activities (working long hours and on weekends), the impossibility of receiving an education, of joining unions and of bettering themselves. At the same time, the lack of knowledge of this morally unjust reality in rural coffee growing areas, and consequently the invisibility of their work together with the lack of social and institutional recognition of the work of women feeders, means that they are not taken into account in plans, programs and projects aimed at guaranteeing the rights of rural women, and especially in those aimed at highlighting the cultural value of their work, since their economic activity does not form part of the statistics, they are not eligible for credit, and culturally they are not considered an integral part of the human gear that sustains coffee growing in Colombia.

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