

The Burden of Light Work: The Devaluation of Women's Work in Brazilian Agriculture

"A woman earns less because she's a woman, right? Her work isn't like a man's ... a man gets a sickle, cuts brush, digs trenches, makes ditches, carries water...and a woman isn't going to do that kinda work. The woman plants, the woman sows, the woman cleans, but can't do heavy work, that's always saved for the man. Then, I mean, that's the reason a man earns more" (woman farm resident, Brejo PB).

"If she is willing, a woman can earn the same as a man ... Now, its like this: the man didn't have the children. So he's not bothered...so he earns 30 cruzeiros a day. I need two days. Because I took care of the children, making the food, this and that, I got hung up..." (migrant worker, Brejo, PB).

"I said I wouldn't anymore mam. Because...the work that the men did, I did. I worked even with them. They earned 30 cruzeiros, I got 20. I won't any more, mam. I'll go pull up beans, which is worth 20 cruzeiros, but I won't clear brush anymore, no..."(migrant worker, Brejo, PB).

"A woman wakes up and rises before her husband. Makes breakfast, milks the cow, prepares dinner, and sometimes even soaks clothes. Then the husband gets up, and they go to the field together. When they come back from the field, the husband is tired of course. Not the wife, because she's made of stainless steel... I've seen - I was shocked - a woman even has to cut tobacco and roll cigarettes for her man to smoke..."(first grade teacher and wife of a small farmer, southern Santa Catarina).

"If a tobacco grower would really calculate the cost, if he calculated the price of labour, it wouldn't be worth it ... the advantage is that, with two hectares, he can have a hot-house. Then he gets kids from five, six, seven years old, he gets a woman, he gets everyone to work..."(Secretary of Agriculture of a municipality in southern Santa Catarina).

"(Tobacco) is a lot of work, but not for the whole year. At harvest time. For two months its a lot of work. But its not that heavy work. Its a little tiring, because at night you have to take care of the fire. And tobacco crops are for young people ...of course an old farmer can't stoop down!" (tobacco grower, in southern Santa Catarina).

The *Sertão* - dry backlands - in Paraíba, 1978, the municipalities of Pombal, São Bento, Brejo do Cruz, Paulista, Belém do Brejo do Cruz, Catolé do Rocha e Riacho dos Cavalos.

Goats, cattle raising and cotton production predominate. The employees who live on the farm (“residents”) are sharecroppers, in a regime of a half or a third: in exchange for use of the land, in general they give the owner half of the cotton crop and a third of the other crops. The “heavy” work is the clearing of brush and the raising of cattle. Women and children help in the planting and the harvest, they take care of the domestic activities and seek to complement the family income, dedicating themselves to crafts such as weaving, finishing hammocks, making hats and lace. All of the material necessary for these jobs is furnished by the intermediaries, who later come for the product. There is a lot of specialisation: some women make only porch hammocks, others just hammock-hangers. The pay for this “light” and slow work, which requires skill and patience, is very little.

The Brejo - wetlands - in Paraíba, 1978, the municipalities of Alagoa Nova, Areia, Pilões, Serraria and Arara.

Here the distinction between “light” and “heavy” work is clearer. Among the migrant workers, it is mainly the men who do the “heavy” work of clearing and tilling the land. To clear means to cut thick brush, even trees, with an ax and sickle. To till is to prepare the earth, without plowing, to plant cane. “Light” work, for women, is to plant, pull up small weeds and to fertilise. For this, women earn half, or less, of a man’s daily pay, although they work the same number of hours. On the farms where there are simple brick-ovens, the women carry bricks in wheel barrows, which is also considered “light” work and paid as such. No man is contracted to do work that is considered to be women’s work, although some activities can be conducted by both sexes. In paying for production, the land owners avoid paying for the time women spend with children and the greater effort they make to clear the same area of cane. In those activities in which physical strength does not bring greater pay, such as planting and fertilising, the presence of men is avoided to better characterise these jobs as “light” work. Despite the subtlety employed in exploiting feminine labour, there are women who, while doing the same jobs as men, earn less.

Southern Santa Catarina, 1983, the municipalities of Içara, Orleans, Nova Veneza and Criciúma.

A region of tobacco cultivation, a crop which is very demanding in terms of labour. In addition to sowing, irrigating, cultivating, weeding and harvesting, the women stitch the tobacco leaves onto sticks, place them in the hot-house and keep watch over them, remove the sticks untie the leaves from the sticks, classify them, tie them into small bunches, make them into bundle and tag them. Then there's more: cleaning the barn before filling it, so that the scraps do not attract rats; returning to clear it after delivering the tobacco, so that poisons in the leaves don't contaminate the food that will be stored there. Finally the fire-wood must be cut for the next harvest. Women and children participate in all of the phases and, once again, it is the idea of "light" work which helps to explain the low price paid by the agroindustries to the planter. In reality, there is a distinction between work that is "tiring" and "heavy." The field work in the first category, but not in the second, demands more work, but it is all "light". For the tobacco grower, "heavy" is the work that demands physical strength and it is always done by adult men.

Different regions different cultures.

A common element is the distinction between "light and "heavy" work. The first is for women and children, The second is a man's job. The same division appears in other locations that I studied. In the region of Araçatuba (São Paulo state), for example, there is a preponderance of women and a large number of children among the temporary workers responsible for the harvest of agricultural products, principally coffee. The explanation given by nearly all of the farmers for this fact: the women work hard, they do not insist on being registered, they do not file complaints in court, they agree to receive less pay per job. Taking care of the house is up to the wife, the wife does not need to work all year long. They are employed only to "supplement the family income", they earn only "a little extra money".

Since they do not do heavy work - such as building fences or taking care of cattle - they receive 75% of a man's daily wage.

It may be thought that women and children perform certain jobs because these jobs are 'light' by nature. But this is not exactly so. In reality, the category of the work is determined by who performs it: the "light" activities are those suited to execution by feminine and child labour. It is important to emphasise that this classification is associated with different pay scales: greater for the "heavy work, less for "light", even when both require the same number of hours or when the physical strength required by one is countered by the skill, patience and the speed required by the other. What determines the value of a day's work is, in sum, the sex of who receives it.

The fallacy of the "natural" distinction between "light and " heavy" work is startling when we recognise the variation that occurs from place to place. In the *Sertão* backlands the women consider as "heavy" that which in the *Brejo* wetlands is "light" (clearing the planting areas for example). Although they are very different, the conditions of life in the *sertao* backlands, a constant victim of drought, are less drastic than those confronted in the green seas of sugar cane in the *Brejo*. To understand them, we should become familiar with the feminine work in the two regions.

In the sugar cane fields of the *Brejo* of Paraíba state, the so-called "regime of bondage" is in force: the employees who live there, the residents, have the right to a small plot of land (no more than two hectares); in exchange, they must "pay the bonding" that is, work for the owner a few days per week (usually three), receiving a lower rate than the workers who live outside of the cane fields.

Since it is impossible to sustain a family on this income alone, the resident is required to work five or six days a week for the landlord. But it's not just that: "paying the bonding" implies a subservience that impedes the employee - and, frequently the entire family - from working for another landowner for higher pay. Above all, it impedes the employee from controlling his own life, since the requirements of the landlord take precedence over any other obligation, need or desire: the resident must always be ready to work at any time. As one

resident said: “Bonded? Didn’t pay anything (for the land), but...when a message from the boss would come, it didn’t matter what he was doing, he had to go...” Under these circumstances, the plot - where they raised subsistence crops, principally maize, beans and manioc - is left to the women and children, who are required to handle all of the “heavy” and “light” work.

Considered even more “heavy” than the field work is the clearing and harvesting of cane done by the migrant workers. The leaves are sharp and cut the skin. The taller the plants, the greater the discomfort. Because of the sugar cutters strikes in some states of the Northeast, all of Brazil could see on television how these migrant workers dress to avoid injury: trousers, long-sleeved shirts or dresses on top, bandannas on their faces, feet covered and cloth on their hands. Handling cane is considered so taxing that the only people who tackle it - in addition to men, obviously, are “single” women, that is women heads of households, single mothers, separated, abandoned or with a sick husband.

In the *Sertão* region, as seen, the owners of large herds of cattle or large cotton farmers employ workers in the partnership system. The man works most of the time on his own plot, selling one day or another of his service, according to his financial need or the wishes of the landlord. The residents, as in the *Brejo*, are “subjects”. But, given that cattle, unlike cane, require little labour, the men and older boys also work in the fields. Women and children help to plant and harvest, but not to “clear brush”, that is to weed the fields.

“Light” and “heavy” work are, therefore, categories which vary according to the sex of the worker and the conditions of tilling the land in different agricultural regions. The conviction that feminine labour is cheaper does not change. This finding is frequent in the sociological literature about the feminine labour force in the cities: the professions considered feminine are always paid less than those considered masculine. Even in the same professions and the same positions, the two sexes receive different pay.

The lack of study about women in agriculture explains the relative indifference with which this reality has been treated in rural areas, although it is widely practised. I found, for example, in southern Santa Catarina, a region where hot-house tobacco is one of the principal

crops, the pioneer company - Companhia de Cigarros Souza Cruz (Souza Cruz cigarette company) - had adopted in 1950 the so-called integrated production system, supplying raw materials and technical assistance to the tobacco farmers, who, in turn, sell them all of their production. Today, other companies in the field operate the same system, indirectly employing many women and children. It is recognised that the work is “tiring”, but not “heavy”. Let us see.

Two types of hot-house tobacco are planted in the region: Virginia (mostly for export) and Amarelinho (for domestic consumption). Little machinery is utilised, which means the intensive use of human labour, which is responsible for a little more than 50% of the total cost of production. Two to three hundred work-shifts per hectare of tobacco in a six-month productive cycle are required, for which reason large families with few resources opt for this crop. In general, a family is able to control one or two hot-houses.

Before planting, it is necessary to prepare the seed beds for sowing. For each hot-house, four seed-beds holding seven thousand seedlings each are necessary. This preparation - which lasts about three weeks and generally involves two people - requires turning the earth with a tractor or animal, hoeing, filtering and the application of methyl bromide to prevent weeds and pests. Once the tobacco is planted, the plants germinate in 12 to 15 days, during which time it is necessary to water the beds daily and apply pesticides every two days. When the plants reach 20 centimetres in height, the seedlings must be transplanted to another plot which must be properly prepared. The replanting takes about 20 days. Next it is necessary to turn over the earth between the rows of tobacco, weed and fertilise once again.

Seventy to eighty days after replanting, in the case of Virginia tobacco and 120 days afterwards in the case of Amarelinho tobacco, the harvest begins. In the first phase, the most difficult, all the work requires stooping over to pick leaves close to the ground. The harvest is the phase which requires the most amount of labour: four to six people, working full-time, to harvest 2 to 2.5 hectares, which include some 25,000 plants, the quantity necessary to fill a hot-house. One tobacco plant must be picked some eight to twelve times to complete the harvest. The oldest and the youngest people only take part in the harvest if there is a lack of

labour. For the former, stooping-over position is painful, while the children do not always have the ability to determine when the leaf is ripe for picking. The tobacco loses quality if it is too green. The leaves do not all ripen at the same time, principally when, because of the death of some plants, other plants are replanted in their place.

In addition to demanding a tremendous quantity of labour, the harvest debilitates the labour that it requires: the leaves give off a dark sticky liquid, which sticks to the hands and clothes. The smell of the plant and the extremely toxic pesticides applied to the plant cause frequent nausea and fainting. According to the workers, some workers take on the colour of the plant during the season:

“Here at home...the greatest sadness is during the harvest. It is for this reason that I want to quit tobacco more than anything, because it’s really pitiful! There’s one in that window, another in the other, supper remains in the pan, one can’t have dinner, another doesn’t have breakfast until late... they become green!”
(wife of a tobacco farmer in Santa Catarina).

The harvested tobacco is taken to a building where there is a hot-house, a storage shed and a covered veranda. Bundles are made which are placed on the bench, a process in which even five-year old children can participate. The bundles are sewn together on a wooden stick of 1.3 metres long, which is done manually or by machine, the stitcher. The prepared sticks are placed in the wooden sheds to dry. When all of the harvested tobacco is ready, the hot-house, which holds some three tons of green tobacco, or 500 kilos of dried tobacco is filled. Once the hot-house is filled, the fire is lit. The leaves require about four days to dry, and the temperature of the hot-house must be controlled day and night. Each harvest requires some ten “hot-houses”, each hot-house producing a total of four to five thousand kilos of dry tobacco.

To work all day at the height of summer and still remain awake at night is one of the worst requirements of tobacco growing, but not the only one. After the first hot-house sessions when the “low” tobacco is dried (the leaves that are closer to the ground), it is necessary to prune the crop, or that is, go through the planted rows and break off the shoots. The plants cannot be allowed to flower because all of their energy must be channelled to the growth in size and weight of the leaf. Later, one of the strongest grow regulators is applied, by machine or hand, to impede the growth of new shoots. Since the plants do not grow evenly, this process

must be repeated a few times, with the application of various insecticides. In the words of a tobacco farmer:

“There are people who cannot apply (the shoot-blocker). A weak or allergic person can’t do it. It causes a strong allergy, burns the skin, burns the eyes, burns all of the skin as if it was a beach”.

Although all of those interviewed refer to the danger of agronomic toxins, they unanimously affirmed they do not take the necessary precautions. We tried to discover the causes for this lack of care. Lack of knowledge of the possible consequences? Lack of money to buy protective equipment? Over confidence in the resistance of the body itself? No. The principal reason is that working with tobacco is very intense and is conducted at the hottest time of the year, with not a moment to stop, not even when the sun is high. To put up with the sun in light clothing requires great effort. To endure it with clothes that cover the entire body and with face masks is impossible.

The final step is the classification of the leaves into four types - low, semi-low, second-picking and the points (the last leaves at the tip of a plant) -, the making of small bundles (the “dolls”), then their wrapping and tagging in bales. The tobacco is classified simply by visual inspection, according to the colour and size of the leaves. The bundles are taken to the processing companies by “shippers” who are owners of small trucks. When the tobacco arrives, however, the company reclassifies it, using special lights. The two processes of classification do not always give the same results, which causes great discontent.

Given the great effort that tobacco growing requires and the risks to health that it presents, why is it chosen? The producers allege basically five motives. Firstly, the income is good, compared to other crops. Secondly, a market for the product is assured, since the cigarette companies agree to buy the entire production. Thirdly, tobacco crops occupy the land for only half of the year, the residual fertilizer being sufficient for the subsequent crops of maize and beans. Fourthly, the tobacco can be cultivated on small non-contiguous plots of land. Finally, since the labour required is not “heavy”, it is possible to make intensive use of women and child labour available in the domestic groups. After five years of age, children can make small piles of the green leaves before the leaves are stitched together in the sticks.

It is this last factor that we are interested in examining, given that the low value placed on women's and child labour explains, at least in part, the low prices paid to the planters by the cigarette companies.

After the revolts of the tobacco farmers in 1979 and 1980, the price of a kilogram of the different types of tobacco has negotiated between the Sindicato das Indústrias de Fumo de Estufa (Union of Hot-house Tobacco Industries) and the Federação dos Trabalhadores Agrícolas do Estado de Santa Catarina (Federation of Agricultural Workers of Santa Catarina State). In the calculation of the cost of tobacco production, which both sides conduct, one of the differences is precisely related to the component represented by the cost of the daily pay of the workers. In the 1982-83 harvest, the companies, when calculating the cost of tobacco production, established a daily average of Cz\$1,37, whereas farmers were paying Cz\$ 2,00 to the contracted workers. In the harvest of 1983-1984 the first price was Cz\$ 3,22 while the second varied between Cz\$4,00 and Cz\$5,00.

The companies alleged that their calculation was based on the average cost of labour in the various tobacco growing regions, and that the south of Santa Catarina was a region of relatively expensive labour, given the presence of coal mines and the strength of the miners' union. This argument was rejected by the workers' federation which argued that the owners' association based its calculations on the national index of consumer prices (INPC), which were always out of step with the real prices. But what is important here is not the cause of the difference between the calculated remuneration and that effectively paid for labour. I am interested in the question as to whether this difference in remuneration would be accepted if most of the work in tobacco production were not done by women and children? In fact, the tobacco farmers admit that, if it were not for the type of labour employed it would not pay them to grow this crop.

Under the hegemony of tobacco, principally during the harvest season, everything else is given secondary attention: home, school, subsistence crops, leisure and even sleep. As the man is considered to be involved in "heavy" work he abandons his other activities. But the woman, who does "light" work, continues to take care of the house and the children. Tobacco

production, as the farmers indicate and as I have indicated, “has lots of little jobs”. Women and older children participate in almost all of the activities, including cutting wood, because the tree utilised is the eucalyptus, considered a soft wood. Only plowing, monitoring the hot-house at night and treating plants with chemicals are generally considered male activities. Where there are enough people, the men take responsibility for the harvest, while the women stitch the leaves. In other operations, such as tying the leaves together, classifying them and making the bales, there is little male participation. In the classification of the leaves it is common for there to be greater participation from the elderly members of the family. When it is necessary to handle these more tedious jobs, the men always have to “go to the city to take care of business”, or attend to a more urgent and interesting responsibility or they are simply tired from the “heavy” work.

Vale do Itajaí. Santa Catarina state. A traditional milk-producing region. 1996.

“Milk is women’s work”, an often repeated phrase. Always true? Yes, when milk is a secondary product, used for home consumption and for a small, but constant, income, spent on family maintenance. Is it light work? It is, “women like the cows”. But it becomes “man’s work” when the milking activity is specialised, when milk is the principal product and the income is substantial. That is, when “it pays”. Is the work more difficult? No, if anything its easier, with mechanical milking machines and purchased rations.

As seen, “light work”, does not mean pleasant work, unnecessary work, or work that is undemanding in terms of time or effort. It can be toilsome, slow or even harmful to ones health - but it is “light” if it can be done by women and children. The question remains: why does the performance of these tasks pay less? The response should not be sought in the specific realities of the regions studied or in the rural sector as a whole. This situation stems from the social evaluation of the man - rural or urban - as the “head of the family” responsible for the maintenance of his “dependants”. Thus, the work of these dependants remains on a secondary plane, fitting, in these cases, a pay that only “helps” the family budget.

The conclusion, therefore, is clear: work is “light” (and the remuneration is low) not because of its characteristics, but because of the position that those who perform the work occupy in the family hierarchy.

About the text: this text is not an academic one. It was written firstly for a Brazilian periodical “Ciência Hoje” (Science Today). In it, the author presents similar situations found in five different parts of Brazil, at five different periods of time. For more information, the author’s studies cited in this paper should be consulted. The institutions supporting this research were: IPEA; Fundação Carlos Chagas/FORD; CAPES; FORD/ANPOCS and CNPq.

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