

WORKING PAPER 18

WOMEN'S WORK IN FAMILY OPERATED
COMMERCIAL FLOWER GROWING UNITS
IN BUENOS AIRES METROPOLITAN AREA

Nidia Tadeo

WOMEN'S WORK IN FAMILY-OPERATED COMMERCIAL FLOWER
GROWING UNITS

BUENOS AIRES METROPOLITAN AREA

Nidia Tadeo, Department of Geography
National University of La Plata, La Plata
Argentina

Introduction

The haphazard expansion of big cities creates a disordered pattern of land use in the periphery, the periurban space--an area of variable size where multiple activities are developed and which has been characterized as a "source of partial social tensions and conflicts" (Valenzuela Rubio, 1985:93) whose manifestations are environmental disruptions and the growth of urbanization.

The microspatial distribution of flower-growing in the southeast of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires results from the periurban agricultural model that utilizes the comparative advantages offered by a great consumption centre. Only intensive production can compensate for the unfavourable effects of the nearness of the big city which include industrial salaries higher than rural ones, high mobility of the workforce and severe competition in the use of the land.

Cut flowers are produced in the counties of La Plata, Berazategui and Florencio Varela, covering an interstitial area neighbouring the great circulation axes that link it to the Federal District (Buenos Aires city). Production involves people from various ethnic groups--Portuguese immigrants (settled four decades ago) and their descendants as well as the less numerous members of the Italian community, and Japanese groups and their first generation of descendants whose settlement in the 1960s and continued until 1987.

The producers cultivate the land as tenants and each has between 1 and 7 Ha.¹ Traditional crops are carnations, chrysanthemums and gladioli. More recently incorporated were roses, freesias, gypsophila and licanthus. All these species are commercialized in the Buenos Aires market for internal consumption. Production amounts to approximately 70 percent of the national production of cut flowers.

Research carried out in 1989 (Tadeo et al, 1990:6-7) showed this activity to be in a state of crisis mainly caused by circumstantial factors - economic instability affecting the country in general in the last years - and also by structural factors. The predominant modes of production are traditional, reinforced by the socio-cultural elements of the ethnic groups. The low technological level is evident in the absence of modern practices and in the low use of machinery which also tends to be obsolete.

Eighty percent of the establishments are production units having little or no surplus at all. Low capital resources in relation to activity requirements and to location factors make new investments difficult. The work force consists of family

¹ The surface area is not indicative of the size of the establishment mainly because cultivation is made under cover. When considering the number of greenhouses per unit we find that 50% of the units have less than 20 greenhouses(1989 figures).

and frequently involves all the members.² If the family ceases to provide the labour, the production unit is reduced in size. This happens in the case of aging producers when their children have taken up other activities; the familial labour deficit is not covered by hired workers and the expenses are reduced to the minimum with husband and wife performing all the jobs that the production process requires. In about 20 per cent of the units family labour, though used, is subsidiary. These are dynamic units, with capital build-up. They hire workers from the labour market.

The Role of Women in Flower - growing Units

The predominance of familial labour involving both males and females with jobs distributed according to age and sex, encouraged us to carry out research that attended to gender. Our aim has been to assess women's contribution to the production process, job performance according to gender roles, and the constraint imposed on women by possibility for spatial mobility, women's aspirations, attitudes and motivations, and their relationship with the community. All this in an attempt to improve those women's life quality. The results will be compared with studies performed in other countries in relation to family-operated agricultural units.

Methodology

The area under study is within the county of La Plata where flower production is primarily carried out by Japanese and Portuguese groups that act as "ethnic enclaves". The conventional sources of statistical information do not supply the data necessary for the research, a problem already been mentioned in other spatial contexts (Sabaté Martínez, 1989; Cànoves, 1989)³ We used the direct questioning technique with a personal interview as a complement. We have preferred this to the interview-conversation method used by Cànoves, 1989, since the profusion of qualitative information involved in the latter makes it difficult to assess the results quantitatively.

Initially, we devised a comprehensive questionnaire taking the flower establishment as a unit for analysis. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: the first was intended to obtain information on the conditions under which the production process and commercialization are carried out. The second included questions on composition of the family group and their activities, work methods, and the attitudes and behaviour of the producer in relation to improvements and decision-making. The questionnaire was answered by a 20 per cent sample of producers who hold the unit which was deemed representative of the total.

² The domestic group (Torrado, 1983) is based on a family group. It implies a unit of abode and consumption and, generally, a production unit as well.

³ Demographic surveys do not record type of job, skills required, time devoted to it, etc. Besides, confusing criteria used to define socio-professional categories, lack of comparability among surveys, and the territorial scale used to communicate the results, lead to the application of inadequate techniques in the collection of basic information.

Another questionnaire was specifically designed for women. It included about 60 questions intended to determine the various jobs they perform within the production unit, their production of fixed assets and of current assets, their housework and average number of hours devoted to those activities per day. It was also intended to determine women's participation in decision-making, distinguishing between decisions made in relation to the production and those related to the household. The last section of the questionnaire concerned spatial mobility and access to it, women's perception of their environment, and their participation in community organizations.

When the survey was carried out, it became apparent that 25 per cent of the units consisted of a large family, especially among the Portuguese, in which the producer's parents or in-laws share the same housing, often including brothers and sisters and brothers and sisters-in-law. Thus, the questionnaire was given to women of varying ages and our aim was enlarged to cover a wider scope in relation to the assignment of gender roles within the household group.

A drawback arose from the fact that there were many Japanese and Portuguese women over 50 who had difficulties communicating in Spanish. Since the survey was personal and, fearing an involuntary influence from the person acting as interpreter on the opinion and evaluation of the person interviewed, we decided to select only those women who were able to answer personally. The questionnaire was anonymous and because of its length we gave people one week to answer it. Some women - the youngest and of Portuguese descent - were very interested in the research and willingly accepted a personal interview to expand on the survey subjects.

Fifteen interviews have been completed so far but we expect that figure to increase⁴.

Women's Activities in Flower Production

The research has not concluded yet, and therefore not all the information obtained from the fieldwork has been included in this report. Preliminary findings indicate the following:

1) In 92 per cent of the production units, the producer states that his wife performs jobs related to the production process and in 62 per cent of the cases wives represent 50 per cent of the labour force.

2) Women's participation in the production process is due to: a) tradition. In some cases their mothers had performed the same job and in others, the wives belonged to a family of farmers. Those women who were over 40 stated that they cannot do any other kind of job. b) Necessity. Their labor is necessary to avoid

⁴ Establishing a relationship of confidence with the people involved in the production process is a time-consuming task, especially when, as in this case, they belong to well-defined ethnic groups having very strong cultural identification.

hiring labour from the market. The nearness of the big city has unfavourable effects, since the higher industrial wages compete with the lower rural ones. c) Other members of the family are not contributing their share of the work. At present, teen-age and young sons do not work in the fields.

3) Women's contribution to the production unit is an extension of the housework and similarly difficult to assess.

The answers provided by the producer himself show a tendency to define the wife's work as "help". Only when we insisted on a better definition of the term did he describe the real work performed by his wife. At present, women under 40 years of age are conscious of the work they perform, but very few of them consider that they should earn a salary for it.

In the Japanese group, the social recognition of the work performed by women is less than among the Portuguese and lacks professional identity. In this group, the survival of the traditional female stereotype is more evident and there is predominance of the domestic status. The table below shows women's participation in production work according to age group, compared with the total number of women living in the unit.

Table 1
Women-relatives of the producer living in flower-growing units
Age groups

	12-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	More than 50
%	6	72	87	94	81

Source: our own survey.

It is noteworthy how women's participation increase with age. We did not break down the percentages into full-time, part-time and sporadic work because of lack of precision in the answers. However, even working part-time in the bed area women perform a double job, in the house and in production.

4) Women's work in the fields is gender-specific: they make flower beds, transplant, weed, water, remove the buds, collect, classify the production and pack it for delivery to the market. They do not use machinery or tools; they do not spray insecticides or fertilizers. This mainly reflects cultural conventions. The gender division of work is more marked among the Japanese groups. Women are assigned the routine tasks which require a certain qualification as regards the species and which they perform more skillfully than men.

5) Job distribution reflects age as well as gender. In a large family, a young woman performs most of the productive work, whereas an older woman takes care of the orchard and prepares jams and preserves, products intended for family consumption.

6) Ninety per cent of the women's housework is not shared by other family members. From the survey it is apparent that young daughters only occasionally help their mothers with the housework, whereas sons never do.

As part of the reproductive work, the producer's wife generally sews and knits for the whole family, thus saving money from the income obtained from the production sale. Twenty of the women surveyed had taken courses in sewing before marriage.

7) Cultural standards bear upon gender roles. Men adopt the role of "boss of the production unit;" when the woman becomes a widow or the man retires, a son becomes the boss. In only three of the units surveyed did a woman take responsibility on a temporary basis for the production unit when the husband travelled to Japan. Thirty per cent of the women state that they would like to be the "boss," however, since they consider themselves co-proprietors. They would also make some innovations in the management of the unit. This same attitude existed among the women of Portuguese origin aged between 30 and 40 years.

Women do not participate in the commercialization of the production sent to the market. Portuguese women participate in the sale of flowers to retailers that come to the unit and bargain about the prices with them, but the producers consider this activity inconsequential. The income from those sales is administered by the women and used to cover reproductive necessities (household expenses, children's expenses).

Women and the Environment: Spatial Mobility and Accessibility

1) From our survey it became evident that women over 50 had arrived from either Japan or Portugal with a low education level and had settled with her family at their present place of abode. Their spatial mobility was restricted by lack of knowledge of the local language and by the low level of accessibility imposed by the local environment itself. The average distance from the flower-growing areas to the town of La Plata is 15 Km.

2) Women in the age range between 30 and 40 years benefited from the expansion of the schooling system into the rural areas. Most of these women have completed their elementary school education. Their choices, however, been limited by the low economic resources of the family, their work in the production unit, and distance. They do not show any interest in performing other activities at present.

3) Even though the importance of the distance-time element varies with the age and the means of transport available, mobility is limited by socio-cultural reasons. Women do not go alone to town for shopping, medical care or entertainment. Ninety five percent of them have no driving license and depend on their husbands for transportation. Ethnic differences are important in this respect. Japanese women are relatively more isolated and when their children are young their mobility is more restricted.

4) Women are not engaged in community activities. Their social life is limited

to the moments they share with other women at the local club⁵ where they go accompanied by their husbands. In this area role differentiation according to gender is also evident.

Women in "mediería" work

The contribution of the flower producer's wife is somewhat different if we examine cases in which the man is a "mediero". This is a modality of remunerated work by which the owner hires - under the responsibility of a person foreign to the production unit (called "mediero") - a work force composed of the latter's kin, who are not directly paid. The "mediero" shares with the owner the risks of the production but does not participate in the economic decisions. Each unit may have one or more "medieros", who live in it under precarious conditions. He receives 35 per cent of the income from production sales. Because of the characteristics of the contracts, this modality forms part of the informal segment of the economy.

The "medieros" constitute a sub-population coming from peripheral areas of northwest Argentina and from the neighbouring countries of Bolivia and Paraguay. They have a very low levels of education or social status.

In the activity of the "medieros" - based on family group work - women's participation is fundamental, although they never make contracts and they are excluded from decision making. The women's work day in the production units is long and they often perform tasks that require great physical strength, but that are deemed residual. These women are frequently found weeding the furrows for many hours outdoors or inside the greenhouses under very high summer temperatures in the early afternoon. Their jobs are underrated by the "mediero". In the interviews he always considered her work as "help" but the women themselves also spoke of it in this way. The reasons for this underevaluation are to be found in cultural and ideological standards that identify women with a private, invisible world that has no social recognition.

These women have no help in the performance of the housework (food preparation, housecleaning, sewing, etc.). There is no spatial separation between her working place and her household. She is responsible for raising the children, transmitting values, and for hygiene. She has no leisure time, since cultivation requires certain tasks to be performed even on Sundays. Her spatial mobility is very restricted and she only travels when the whole family emigrates from one unit to another.

Conclusions

In the flower production activities that are carried out in the Southeast of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, women's work is important even though the family group itself underestimates it. In the daily activities that women perform, productive and reproductive jobs are not differentiated, the same as their work in relation to

⁵ Each ethnic group only participates in its own community club.

time and space. Women's participation for the benefit of the system is restricted by the cultural and ideological values of the groups involved which subordinate the importance of women's shares to the satisfaction of family needs.

1) Socio-cultural standards limit the possibility of choice of women who are working at the production unit: they are permanently dependent and do not participate in community organizations in the rural environment.

2) The different ethnic groups are clearly marked by gender role assignments. The Japanese women, in this respect, participate less in production and their contribution is marginal and often invisible.

3) The situation of women within the "mediero" system is even worse than that of the other groups, as their hours are longer and rewards less.

The spread of the city over rural areas implies a process of disruption and transformation in socio-economic structures. Our survey suggests a trend towards change among the teen-age daughters of the producers, especially those of Portuguese descent. They try to become involved in urban activities, taking up studies both at high school and university levels, where agronomy has no place. Further, the Portuguese women who perform production jobs at their units have different expectations for their daughters' future: a less trying life, better remuneration and social ascent.

We should remark, in addition, that this study has shown similar results as those performed on similar agricultural family units, for example, in the wet area of Catalonia (Spain) (Cànoves, 1989) where the survival of small production units would not be possible without the contribution of women to productive work.

Bibliography

- Archetti, E. and Stölen, K. 1975. Explotación familiar y acumulación de capital en el campo argentino. Siglo XXI. Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- Cànoves, G. 1989. La actividad de la mujer en la explotación agraria familiar: una primera aproximación en las comarcas de Osona y el Gironés. Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica - Departament de Geografia - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona - N° 14: 73-78.
- Jelin, E. 1984. Familia y unidad doméstica: mundo público y vida privada. Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad (CEDES). Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- Tadeo, N. Fedle, M. and Niz E. 1990. Agricultura en espacios periurbanos. Departamento de Geografía, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina (inédito).
- Torrado, S. 1983. La familia como unidad de análisis en censos y encuestas de hogares. Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales (CEUR). Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- Valenzuela Rubio, M. 1985. Los espacios periurbanos. Actas de la Segunda Reunión de Geógrafos Españoles. Murcia, España.
- Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG - 1984. Geography and Gender. Hutchinson, London.

WORKING PAPER SERIES

1. "Development and Factory Women: Negative Perceptions from a Malaysian Source Area" **Amriah Buang**
2. "Household Energy Supply and Rural women's Work in Ghana" **Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf**
3. "Access of Female Plantation Workers In Sri Lanka to Basic Needs Provisions" **L.K. Vidyamali Samarasinge**
4. "The Impact of Labour-Saving Devices on the Lives of Rural African Women: Grain Mills in The Gambia" **Hazel Barrett and Angela Browne**
5. "Women and Agriculture: A Case Study from the South Pacific, Western Samoa" **Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop**
6. "Divisions of Labour in Rural India" **Parvati Raghuram and Elizabeth Oughton**
7. "Housewifization and colonization in the Colombian Rain Forest" **Janet Townsend**
8. "Viewing Rural Development Programmes in India from a Gender Perspective" **Rameswari Varma**
9. "Deconstructing the Household: Women's Roles Under Commodity Relations in Highland Bolivia" **Colin Sage**
10. "The Intersection Between Class and Gender Relations: Theory, Method and a Case Study from Papua New Guinea" **Stephanie Fahey**
11. "Regional Variations in Gender Roles and Relations in Farm Households in Spain" **M. Dolores Garcia-Ramon, Josephina Cruz Isabel Salamana, Nuria Valdovinos and Montserrat Vilarino**
12. "The relationship Between Community Size, Female Employment Rates and the Educational Level of the Female Labour Force" **Peter Meusberger and Jurgen Schmude**
13. "Child Care as a Space-Time Constraint in the Daily Life of the Economically Active Mother in Greater Pretoria" **Joan Fairhurst**
14. "Un Plan Directeur du Point de Vue des Femmes" **Sonia Alves Calio**
15. "The Impact of the Debt Crises on Nigerian Women" **Marie Pauline Eboh**

- 16 "Women's Work and the Urban Household Economy in Developing Countries" **Briavel Holcomb and Tamar Rothenburg**
- 17 "Women in the Italian Workplace: Evolution of a Role" **Giselle Cortesi and Marina Marengo**
- 18 "Women's Work in Family-Operated Commercial Flower Growing Units. Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area" **Nidea Tadeo**

I should like to order the following paper(s) at £3.50 or US\$5.00 each (p. & p. incl.):
(please state number and author) _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Please send order to Janet Momsen, Chair, IGU Study Group on Gender and Geography, The University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, United kingdom. Cheques should be made payable to Janet Momsen(IGU).