

The role of women in the development of animal traction in Cuba

by

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Summary

Since the Revolution of 1959, women have occupied a very important place in the social and economic development of Cuba, and they have full equality with men under the law. In agriculture, women play a vital role in almost all aspects of the productive processes, working as leaders, technicians, specialists and workers. However, for various reasons, the participation of women in activities relating to animal traction is quite poor. In traditional Cuban society, men worked with draft animals and related transport operations. Today, men still tend to dominate this sector, at the farm level and in research and development activities. Consequently, several related actions should be undertaken in order to improve the situation, including appropriate training for women and promoting appropriate working conditions and attitudes in the agricultural sector.

Introduction

Women are actively participating in the economic and social development of Cuba. Since the Revolution, they have made outstanding contributions in the areas of health, education, culture, science, sport and agriculture. At the outset of the Revolution, a series of measures were taken aimed at improving the standard of living of the rural population in general. These included the first and second Land Reforms that gave property rights to the farmers who worked the land. This meant that many women became landowners. Other measures included the literacy campaign, the creation of new rural schools and colleges and the construction of hospitals and clinics to serve rural communities.

When comparisons are made, it is clear that lives of rural women are better than they were before the Revolution. The Constitution of the Republic now guarantees women completely equality, with equal civil rights and equal inheritance of land and other property. Labour rights also support women, with paid maternity leave that has been extended to one year, social security for incapacity and equal access to pensions.

In the past ten years, as a result of the economic conditions in the country, animal traction has been developed. Linked to this process have been Cuban women, although sometimes almost anonymously. This paper briefly explores women's participation in this process.

In Cuba, 25% of the population lives in the rural sector, and of these, 47% are women. Table 1 shows the number of rural women, most of whom are directly or indirectly involved in the development process.

Table 1. Urban and rural populations in Cuba

<i>Population</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
Urban	4 118 000	4 294 000	8 412 000
Rural	1 469 000	1 298 000	2 768 000
Total	5 587 000	5 592 000	11 180 000

Source: Estadísticas, 1999

About 33% of the land used for agricultural production is owned by the State and is organised in farms, ranches, forestry enterprises, agro-industrial sugar complexes and other State enterprises. The private sector, which farms 67% of the land, comprises:

- Basic Units of Cooperative Production (UBPCs, *Unidades Básicas de Producción Cooperativa*) that derive from the division of the old state farms to cooperatives on an indefinite usufruct basis, with profits are shared among the workers.
- Agricultural Production Cooperatives (CPAs, *Cooperativas de Producción Agropecuaria*) in which there is voluntary union of land and means of production to produce collectively
- Credit and Service Cooperatives (CCSs, *Cooperativas de Créditos y Servicios*) in which farmers maintain their individual farm properties but associate with others for mutual benefit and in order to receive services, technical assistance and materials supplied by the State.
- Small individual farms, individuals with usufruct rights, and other non-State arrangements (Alvarez *et al*, 2000).

From the start of the cooperative movement, women were involved and incorporated. The work of the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) has made it possible for women to be increasingly involved in the agricultural productive process over the years. Women have been trained in farming, as well as in new technologies, financial control and management techniques.

Women in Cuban agriculture

In all forms of agricultural production, women may take active roles as leaders, farm workers, and technical specialists. However, the majority of workers and leaders in all types of cooperative are men. In the UBPCs, women account for 18.5% of the people working in general agriculture and 16.5% for work with sugar cane. The participation of women in CPAs and CCSs has been very slow (Columbié, Martínez and López, 1990). This is shown in Table 2.

Year	Percentage of women	
	CPAs	CCSs
1996	17.2	8.9
1997	17.3	9.6
1998	17.4	8.2

Source: ANAP, 1999

Usufruct family farms started to develop during the Special Period, but the majority of these were registered in the names of men. The proportion of women taking advantage of this arrangement was only 3.6% in 1997 and 3.8% in 1998.

In the State agricultural sector, women constitute 27% of the people employed while 20% of the workforce in the sugar industry are women. This means that there are about 200 000 women working in these sectors (Columbié and Romero, 1998). Women are also involved in agricultural marketing. Some are technicians in the Ministries of Agriculture and Sugar and others work in agricultural research and development institutions.

Urban agriculture has been converted into one of the principal sources of employment in the country and at the moment more than 72 800 women work in this type of production, a number which is likely to rise in the coming years. The development of this type of agricultural production in Cuba has made it possible to offer vegetables throughout the year in the agricultural markets, and to increase the supply produce such as root crops, fruit, meat and eggs, whilst

converting idle or unproductive land into areas of intensive agricultural production (MINAGRI, 2001).

Under-representation of women

In spite of the laws and efforts to achieve complete equality for women, it is clear that the agricultural sector is still dominated by men. Among the possible reasons why women are not more represented in this sector are:

- Domestic workload (in Cuban families, the responsibility for many domestic chores is still fundamentally assigned to women).
- Discriminatory attitudes towards women in the work place (despite legislation guaranteeing equality, there are still engrained attitudes and some preference to employ men for certain jobs, due to male traditions and/or male physical strength).
- Insufficient job training for women (perhaps linked to discriminatory attitudes).
- Inappropriate working conditions (real or perceived).

In terms of domestic workload, this is being reduced by the provision of social services. These include:

- Nearby free medical attention via the family doctor and nurse programme which covers even the remoter rural areas.
- Nearby networks of rural hospitals, infant care facilities and pre-maternal homes and other services assisting mothers, children and families.
- Provision of piped drinking water in most rural areas.
- House building initiatives and the wide availability of good rural housing.
- The creation of access roads and improved infrastructure and communications.
- Actions of social organisations that work together to achieve higher standards of living (women often serve as community leaders in such organisations).

There are also some encouraging trends relating to the education and training of women.

- The average school education level of rural women is now between 9th and 12th grades.
- There have been increases in girls training for agriculture, particularly in the middle-level positions. In 1998, 73% of middle-level technicians in the specialties of the sugar industry, chemistry and food were women as were 42% in of those training in agricultural production. However, in 1998, only 36% of university graduates in agricultural sciences were women.

The role of women in animal traction development

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the agricultural sector has adopted a variety of means to guarantee agricultural production. In order to overcome the shortage of fuel and other inputs needed for motorised mechanisation, animal traction has increased. Oxen, horses and mules are increasingly used for transporting people and freight, as well as for tillage and other farming operations.

It has been a tradition in Cuba that ox handlers, ranchers (cowboys), mule handlers and the drivers of horse carriages in Cuba are normally men. Only in isolated cases can women be seen in these roles. Women do ride horses in rural areas for domestic, social and professional reasons, but not as much as men do. There are no legal constraints to women working with draft animals, but there are still significant psychological and cultural barriers. The other practical limiting factors mentioned may also influence this situation.

Women are more represented in the services that support animal traction. For example, in the small workshops that produce ropes, forehead pads for oxen, work clothes and other articles. In

addition, many veterinary surgeons, animal nutritionists, artificial insemination experts and people working in the dairy industry are women. In the mountain areas, the Turquino Plan opens a range of work possibilities for women who previously worked in tree nurseries. They now find increasing opportunities in rehabilitating coffee, cocoa and forest plantations, where mules, donkeys or horses may be used for transport.

Even the subject of animal traction research and development has insufficient participation of women. In the first three International Animal Traction Congresses, organised in Cuba by the agricultural mechanisation institute (IIMA), only 13% of participants have been women. Of these, some (8%) were ox handlers and the rest were specialists, technicians, scientists and others linked to this subject area.

Conclusions

The achievements of social welfare and justice for the population as a whole, and particularly for women are beyond question. Cuban women already play an active role in the agricultural production process, but this could be greater. There is much potential to increase the proportion of women in the agricultural labour force (at all levels), and this may mean creating the appropriate basic conditions and cultural attitudes. There is need to develop strategies to continue advancing. In order to achieve this, the actions already under way to improve working conditions for women must be continued. Training activities for women should be increased. Ways of engaging women in activities related to animal traction should be defined and encouraged.

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