

## Scientific Paper

## Gender experience in the Local Agricultural Innovation Program in Matanzas province, Cuba

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### Abstract

Rural women's empowerment is essential for the promotion of sustainable agricultural development and the improvement of food security. This study was conducted in the Martí, Perico, Colón and Jagüey municipalities, of Matanzas province –Cuba–, in order to socialize the experience of the gender topic in the framework of the Local Agricultural Innovation Program (PIAL, for its initials in Spanish). The methodology used allowed to interrelate theory, practice, action and participation, through workshops, participant observation, animation dynamics, life histories and storm of aspirations. It could be noted that women suffer an excessive burden of tasks and responsibilities, proven by the fact that, besides helping in the work of the farm, they undertake domestic chores and children care; while men mostly perform the role of providers. Men aspire to achieve balance and harmony in the family, to improve household economy and farm prosperity; while women, although coinciding with this criterion, also want to excel professionally. The Local Agricultural Innovation Program in Matanzas province has achieved their integration to favor the social recognition of rural women, as well as their participation and influence on decision-making. The great challenge faced by development projects today is to achieve the empowerment of Cuban rural women.

Keywords: decision making, rural women, social participation

### Introduction

Women play a key role in the attainment of food security at all levels. Nevertheless, they perform this function by facing important social, economic and cultural barriers, which persist due to the traditional construction of the gender order in the world, discriminatory order that places women under conditions of disadvantage and in position of inequity and subordination in the family, community and social spheres (FAO, 2005).

Gender, as analysis category has been widened, and terms have emerged associated to it, such as: gender approach or perspective, roles and gaps, identity, among others (Aguilar, 2008). In the reviewed literature (ONU Mujeres, 2014; UNESCO, 2014) there is coincidence about the fact that the concept of gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being man or woman, as well as to the relations between women and men, girls and boys. These attributes, opportunities and relations are socially constructed and are learned through socialization processes. Likewise, it is stated that gender is part of the wider sociocultural context; and for the sociocultural analysis class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age are included,

which contribute to explain what occurs in the relations among different sexed beings and reveal the way in which men and women behave and are related in a certain society.

This category transcends the biological differences between sexes and is focused on the existing differences and inequities between men and women due to the socioeconomic context, the historical and political conditions, as well as the cultural and religious patterns of the diverse societies in which they interact (Delgado *et al.*, 2010).

In Cuba, a strong trend dedicated to gender studies and the woman's role in society has been developing (Hernández, 2008). The topics related with the gender perspective in agriculture are assumed as a work tool to document and understand the different women and men's roles, priorities and responsibilities in the use and benefit of natural resources, because even under conditions of apparent equality regarding living and working conditions, the realities they live show different characteristics (Benítez *et al.*, 2012).

In recent years work has been done to incorporate in projects a gender equity approach; and through them, a series of principles, conditions,

strategies, actions and procedures have been identified, which have facilitated development initiatives, with an impact on the inter-gender relations established in the family and the communities searching for equity. The agricultural sector is not exempt from this problem, and women play a decisive role in the development of traditional as well as conventional agriculture; the gap established between women and men is many times larger, which makes the work developed by females invisible (Benítez *et al.*, 2012).

Due to the above-expressed facts this study was conducted, in order to socialize the experience of the gender topic in the framework of the Local Agricultural Innovation Program (PIAL).

## Materials and Methods

The studies were conducted in the Perico, Martí, Colón and Jagüey municipalities, located in Matanzas province –Cuba–. The methodology used was described by Aguilar (2008), which allowed to interrelate theory, practice, action and participation, through workshops, participant observation, animation dynamics and storm of aspirations.

During the sensitization and diagnosis stage tools were used which propitiated group work; the animation allowed to put everyone at the same level and to guarantee a synergy between the emitter and the receiver. The tools used were aimed at four fundamental aspects:

1. Construction of the concept of gender
2. Work division
3. Access, use and control of benefits and resources
4. Women and men's aspirations

The participatory diagnosis with gender approach was carried out in the productive entities of each selected municipality (table 1). The techniques applied during the process were the ones described by Aguilar *et al.* (1999) and Pérez and Bao (2011).

Table 1. Women and men's participation in the diagnosis with gender approach.

Municipality	Participants	Women	Men
Martí	32	17	15
Perico	35	19	16
Colón	37	20	17
Jagüey Grande	25	14	11
Total	129	70	59

## Techniques used:

- *Introduction dynamics "I feel like (a)"*

1. The persons were asked to think which animal they identify with.
2. Afterwards they were asked, one by one, to describe the animal and the reasons for which they identified with it. They should also say their name and any other quality they wanted to express.
3. This dynamics allowed the person who facilitated, to identify and know a little bit more the characteristics and qualities that existed in the group.

- *Construction of the concept of gender*

In separate teams, by sex, flip charts and felt-tip pens were provided for performing the different activities. In this case people reflected on the concept of gender, the audience was divided into two groups: one of men and the other of women.

- *Work division*

«24-hour clock». It was carried out in order to determine and visualize all the activities men and women performed during a normal working day.

- *Techniques to identify the access, use and control of benefits and resources*

To whom do things belong? It was done with the purpose of determining who had the access, control and benefit of goods and resources.

- *Techniques of identification of women and men's perceptions and evaluations (socialization)*

Storm of aspirations, which was applied in order to identify the main women and men's aspirations that were related with the real possibilities of improving their condition and position in their personal, social and community life.

## Results and Discussion

### *Construction of the concept of gender*

With regards to the concept of gender, the ideas of the male team approached mainly man and woman's incorporation to the same tasks at home and in society, as well as the respect to diversity; however, women defined gender as a historical-social category given by the roles assigned by society to men and women, in which diversity, equity and equality between the two sexes.

It was stated in the plenary that gender is much more than the biological characteristics that differentiate men and women; it was agreed that it is sharing roles, responsibilities, rights, participation in society and family with equality of conditions. This coincides with the report by

Lagarde (2008), who states that gender is, also, the socially constructed behavior; people are not born with it, but in the socialization process a set of traits is transferred which defines the different forms of behavior, values and expectations for men and women; for such reason it is said that gender is constructed; in it, culture is defining. The elements related with gender vary within cultures and among them, and change over the course of time.

### *Work division*

The «24-hour clock» technique was one of the tools that allowed to identify the work division, as well as to determine and visualize all the activities that men and women carried out during a normal working day. During the application of this dynamic activity, in the four municipalities, the disproportion between men and women's obligations could be observed.

A consensus was arrived at regarding the fact that 82 % of the women in the Martí municipality had an excessive burden of tasks and responsibilities; while in Perico, 78 %, because in addition to supporting the work of the farm they were in charge of household chores and children care. Likewise, in the Colón municipality 80 % of the women had an excessive burden of work, because they shared their time in their workplace, the work of the farm and the care of children and elders. Nevertheless, in the Jagüey municipality only 66 % of the women expressed being overloaded with the farm work and children care. From the men who participated in the workshops 100 % performed as providers; in Martí, 33 % of them shared the roles with their wives, 25 % in Perico, 41 % in Colón and 36 % in Jagüey Grande.

To the question «what can we do», the criteria coincided in the advantages of sharing the household tasks and chores, because it is beneficial for the entire family; as well as in having incidence on the children's education, since an early age, with regards to these issues, and thus prepare them better for life and as a way to achieve harmony in the family environment.

### *Techniques to identify the access, use and control of benefits and resources*

Likewise, the technique «to whom do things belong» (Aguilar, 1998) contributed to the construction of knowledge, which allowed to identify the access, use and control of benefits and resources by the participants. In the Perico, Colón

and Jagüey municipalities, women chose kitchen and children care utensils; in the Martí municipality, 11 % of the women preferred the use and access to the money and the farm. Nevertheless, in the four municipalities men identified the use and control of the money and the farm.

This dynamics proved, in a practical way, that men owned the house and the farm and were also the ones who supported the economic development of the family. Emphasis was made on the need to acknowledge women's work and fight for its remuneration.

### *Techniques for identifying women and men's perceptions and assessment*

The «storm of aspirations» allowed to appreciate that 100 % of the men aspired to achieve balance and harmony in the family, to improve the household economy and farm prosperity; while 60 % of the women coincided with this criterion, and 40 % also wanted to excel professionally. Likewise, they evaluated the possibility of reconciling the work and family life through entrepreneurship, trying to combine the remunerated work with family care, which coincides with the report by Vázquez-Luna *et al.* (2013) and Sánchez-Flores *et al.* (2014).

Real women's participation in development means having the opportunity to express their points of view and make the decisions that affect their lives. It means that their needs and interests must be included in the definition of project objectives, and be taken into consideration when the impact of the actions developed by the projects is evaluated (Pérez and Bao, 2011).

As a result of the diagnosis workshops, the need of training emerged on the topics related with food preservation, self-esteem and leadership, gender equality and equity, and masculinities. In this sense, table 2 shows a summary of the main training activities performed during the studied period. It is important to emphasize that the number of participants increased, from the dissemination and motivation activities carried out by the project farmers in other productive entities.

Historically, the work of women, in general, and of rural women, in particular, has been made invisible by the different societies (Vitelli and Borrás, 2013); nevertheless, the participatory workshops allowed to acknowledge women's work in rural areas, stimulate them in the implementation of technologies and in decision-making, besides consolidating and overarching the gender topic.

Table 2. Summary of the main training activities during the study.

Course/workshop	Total	Women	Men
Gender and local development	29	24	5
Food preservation. Colón municipality	47	36	11
Women in the rural context. Martí municipality	28	27	1
Gender sensitization. Jagüey Grande municipality	30	21	9
Food preservation. Perico municipality	75	37	38
Masculinities	13	-	13
Self-esteem and leadership	16	16	-
Gender equality and equity	33	21	12
Rural women and their participation in the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). El Roque, Perico municipality	29	28	1
Flower arrangements with local resources. Research Station Indio Hatuey	23	15	8
Women in the rural context. Their participation in the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC)	20	18	2
Food preservation. Agricultural Polytechnic Institute Gabriel Valiente. Colón municipality	27	14	13
Flower arrangements with local resources. Research Station Indio Hatuey	25	14	11
Preservation of seasonings, roots and tubers and vegetables. Martí municipality	31	19	12

Figure 1 shows men and women's participation in the training actions; it is necessary to emphasize that women reached a higher percentage (68 %) and only 32 % of the men participated, for which during the reflection and discussions the importance of increasing the workshops on masculinities to sensitize men with the gender topic and incorporate them in the equality and equity actions, was analyzed.

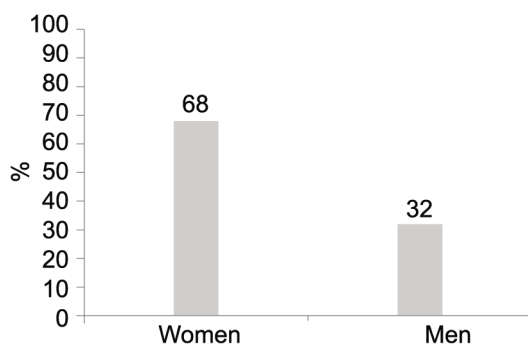


Figure 1. Men and women's participation in the training actions (%).

During this study synergy was achieved with other collaboration projects, as well as an impact on society during the learning cycle in the topics of food preservation, flower arrangements, masculinities, and self-esteem and leadership.

The empowerment of women and their full participation under equality conditions in all the areas of society, including the participation in decision-making processes and access to power, are fundamental to reach equality, equity and development (Soares and Murillo-Licea, 2013).

In this sense, INMUJERES (2013) states that women's empowerment should be promoted, which implies triggering individual and/or collective processes, through which women increase their participation in the decision spheres of the personal, family, community, economic, social and political life.

### Final considerations

Women and men's participation in the project meant an opportunity to reflect about the factors that have incidence on social inequality, women's invisibility in the rural context and gender barriers to enhance food security in Cuba.

Women have double employment which represents an excessive burden of tasks and responsibilities, because besides supporting the work in the farm they are in charge of household chores and children care; while men mostly play the role of providers. Men aspire to achieve balance and harmony in the family; while women, although coinciding with these criteria, want to excel professionally.

Higher participation in training and social recognition of women was achieved. Likewise, women were incorporated to a larger number of agricultural activities, as well as to the introduction of technologies in the productive entities.

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