

Gender-based Violence: Situations of Vulnerability of Family Farmer Women

Violência de Gênero: Situações de Vulnerabilidade de Mulheres Agricultoras Familiares

Violencia de Género: Situaciones de Vulnerabilidad de las Mujeres Agricultoras Familiares

RESUMO

Objetivo: identificar situações que tornam mulheres agricultoras familiares vulneráveis à violência de gênero. **Método:** estudo exploratório e descritivo, de abordagem qualitativa, com 35 agricultoras familiares de comunidades rurais do município de Barra Funda, Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. Os dados foram coletados por entrevistas semiestruturadas e analisados por meio da análise temática de conteúdo. **Resultados:** foram identificadas as seguintes situações que contribuem para a vulnerabilidade das mulheres agricultoras familiares à violência de gênero: (des)acolhimento, (des)conhecimento, culpabilização, abstenção, silenciamento, invisibilidade e isolamento. **Conclusão:** A violência de gênero no meio rural é atravessada por fatores estruturais, culturais e geográficos que limitam o acesso das mulheres à informação, aos serviços de apoio e à denúncia. Assim, as políticas públicas e ações de enfrentamento à violência contra a mulher devem ser formuladas considerando essa realidade.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Violência de Gênero; Violência contra a Mulher; Vulnerabilidade em Saúde; População Rural; Saúde da Mulher;

ABSTRACT

Objective: to identify situations that make female family farmers vulnerable to gender-based violence. **Method:** exploratory and descriptive study, with a qualitative approach, with 35 family farmers from rural communities in the municipality of Barra Funda, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed through thematic content analysis. **Results:** the following situations were identified that presented the vulnerability of female family farmers to gender-based violence: (un) acceptance, (lack of) knowledge, blaming, abstention, silencing, invisibility and isolation. **Conclusion:** Gender-based violence in rural areas is crossed by structural, cultural and geographic factors that limit women's access to information, support services and reporting. Therefore, public policies and actions to combat violence against women must be formulated considering this reality.

DESCRIPTORS: Gender-Based Violence; Violence Against Women; Health Vulnerability; Rural Population; Women's Health.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: identificar situaciones que hacen que las mujeres agricultoras familiares sean vulnerables a la violencia de género. **Método:** estudio exploratorio y descriptivo, con enfoque cualitativo, con 35 agricultores familiares de comunidades rurales del municipio de Barra Funda, Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. Los datos fueron recolectados mediante entrevistas semiestruturadas y analizados mediante análisis de contenido temático. **Resultados:** se identificaron las siguientes situaciones que presentan la vulnerabilidad de las mujeres agricultoras familiares frente a la violencia de género: (falta de) aceptación, (falta de) conocimiento, culpabilización, abstención, silenciamiento, invisibilidad y aislamiento. **Conclusión:** La violencia de género en las zonas rurales se ve afectada por factores estructurales, culturales y geográficos que limitan el acceso de las mujeres a la información, los servicios de apoyo y la denuncia. Por ello, las políticas públicas y acciones para combatir la violencia contra las mujeres deben formularse teniendo en cuenta esta realidad.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Violencia de Género; Violencia contra la Mujer; Vulnerabilidad en Salud; Población Rural; Salud de la Mujer.

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INTRODUCTION

Family farming is a predominant form of production and work in rural areas, characterized by a social, cultural, economic, and environmental organization in which agricultural activities are managed by the family, with a predominance of family labor⁽¹⁾. In this context, women, in addition to facing challenges in being recognized and valued as farmers, experience various forms of gender-based violence that affect their lives and bodies.

The Belém do Pará Convention (1994)⁽²⁾ defines violence against women as any action or conduct based on gender that causes death, harm, or physical, sexual, or psychological suffering, whether in the public or private sphere. "The significant concentration of this type of violence has historically occurred against women's bodies, and violent relationships exist because asymmetrical power relations permeate people's daily lives" (p. 295)⁽³⁾.

The category of gender is fundamental to understanding violence against women, as it refers to the so-

cial, political, and cultural construction of male and female identities. Gender acts as a constitutive element of social relations, structured on perceived differences between the sexes, and as a primary means of attributing meaning to power relations⁽⁴⁾.

Gender-based violence is a phenomenon deeply rooted in gender inequality and remains, in all societies, one of the most serious violations of human rights⁽⁵⁾. Estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate that approximately 1 in 3 women worldwide will experience gender-based violence during their lifetime⁽⁶⁾.

In rural areas, women's vulnerability to gender-based violence is exacerbated by factors such as geographical isolation, long distances to specialized services for combating violence and health facilities, poor roads and transportation, and inadequate means of communication, making women more vulnerable⁽⁷⁾. In addition, cultural and generational aspects contribute to the normalization and trivialization of this violence, sustained by dynamics of subordination, resignation, guilt,

fear, and shame⁽⁸⁾.

Addressing vulnerability in health is crucial to understanding the factors that increase this exposure, considering the different degrees and natures of individuals' and communities' susceptibility to suffering, illness, and finitude, shaped by social, programmatic, and individual aspects⁽⁹⁾.

Given this scenario, it is essential to deepen the analysis of violence against women in rural contexts. The conditions in these areas can aggravate violence, make it difficult to confront, and encourage victims to remain silent. Thus, this article aims to identify, based on the narratives of women family farmers in a municipality in northwestern Rio Grande do Sul, the situations that make them vulnerable to gender-based violence.

This is an exploratory and descriptive study with a qualitative approach, carried out in the rural area of the municipality of Barra Funda, located in the northwestern region of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The participants were female family farmers registered in the Family Farmer Registry (CAF) or with a Declaration of Aptitude for the National Family Farming

Program (DAP) active on the DAP/MDA portal, residing in eight rural communities in the municipality and involved in Emater/RS-Ascar activities between 2021 and 2023. A total of 153 women were considered eligible, with the final selection made by lottery, ensuring at least four women per community. A total of 35 women participated, distributed as follows: 4 in Linha Cabrito, 4 in Linha Carrijo, 4 in Linha Encantado, 4 in Linha Ervalzinho Alto, 3 in Linha Ervalzinho Baixo, 7 in Linha Santa Lúcia, 5 in Linha Santo Antônio Agusso, and 4 in Linha São José Agusso. The exclusion criterion was the presence of cognitive limitations or communication difficulties that would compromise understanding and/or response to questions. However, none of the participants presented such conditions.

Data collection took place between March and April 2024 through semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. The participants were contacted by phone or WhatsApp to schedule appointments. Of the 35 interviews, 32 took place at the participants' homes and 3 at the Emater/RS-Ascar office, according to the interviewees' preferences. The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes, with audio recorded in MP3 and transcribed in Microsoft Word for analysis.

The data were analyzed using the thematic content analysis proposed by Minayo⁽¹⁰⁾, which comprises the stages of pre-analysis, exploration of the material (coding), and treatment/interpretation of the results.

In the pre-analysis, a preliminary reading was initially carried out to identify patterns and raise preliminary hypotheses. This was followed by a thorough reading, highlighting the most relevant excerpts with the aid of visual markings. In the material exploration stage, the selected excerpts were grouped by color in a new

document according to thematic similarity, resulting in the formation of meaning nuclei (MN). The most representative statements from each nucleus were used to compose descriptive summaries. Finally, the SMs were organized into analytical categories, from which five emerged. This study presents the category: Situations that make women family farmers vulnerable to gender-based violence.

As a complementary visual resource, a word cloud was used, which facilitated the interpretation and communication of the data, contributing to a more in-depth analysis. The cloud was generated from the NS of the interviews using the Simple Word Cloud software.

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), under opinion No. 6,613,542 and CAAE 7651842300005346.

RESULTS

Characterization of participants

In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, most of the female family farmers interviewed (40%) are aged between 50 and 59, followed by 34.3% who are aged 60 or over. Younger women represent a smaller share, with 14.3% between 30 and 39 years old and only 11.4% between 40 and 49 years old. These data point to the aging and lower presence of young women in family farming.

In terms of education, approximately 45.7% of women have only incomplete elementary school education, while 31.4% have completed high school. In addition, 11.4% have completed elementary school, 8.6% have not completed high school, and only 2.9% have higher education.

In terms of race, 85.7% of participants self-identified as white. Most of the women interviewed are married (77.1%). In family farming,

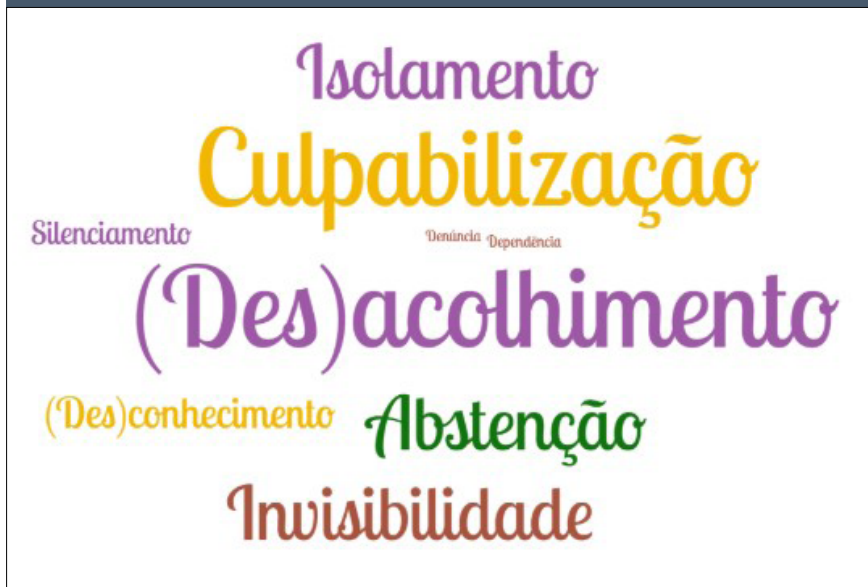
marriage plays a significant role in the transfer of land, since most of the women studied gained access to land through marriage, living and working on property inherited from their husbands or in-laws.

Most rural properties are less than 20 hectares in size and were largely inherited by the husband. The most common labor configuration involves the joint participation of the woman and her husband or partner. The main source of income is grain production, followed by dairy farming.

Situations that make women family farmers vulnerable to gender-based violence

Gender-based violence in rural areas manifests itself in a context of multiple vulnerabilities, which are often invisible and normalized by the victims themselves. Based on the reports of the women family farmers interviewed, situations emerged that intensify their exposure to violence, making it difficult to recognize, report, and confront the aggression. Among these, the following stand out: (dis)acceptance, (dis)recognition, blame, abstention, silencing, invisibility, and isolation, represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1- Word cloud representing situations that make women family farmers vulnerable to gender-based violence



“(Dis)welcoming” emerges in women’s accounts as a factor that makes them vulnerable, since many of them are unaware of specific places where they could seek support and talk about violence, pointing to the absence of visible services in the municipality. As identified in the interview excerpt:

Here in our municipality, there is no [place where women can seek shelter]. It is something that is needed; there could be a women’s group, a support group, even to talk to a psychologist, to get help. It is something that is missing in our municipality. (M22)

But I don’t think there is [a space for women to talk about violence], if there is, I don’t know about it. But I don’t think there is a specific place like that for women, a shelter. (M24)

The lack of specialized services in rural areas, such as women’s police stations, health centers, and shelters, increases women’s vulnerability, especially in small towns, where these resources are limited⁽⁷⁾. The National Survey on Violence against Women re-

veals that most reports occur in cities with more than 50,000 inhabitants, highlighting the difficulty of access to justice in smaller areas⁽¹¹⁾. In these municipalities, women often go to regular police stations, where they frequently face inadequate care and are victims of another form of aggression: institutional violence⁽¹²⁾.

The lack of specific spaces for women may reflect a lack of information and adequate dissemination of these services, as illustrated by the statement of one participant who demonstrates a lack of information about the existence of shelters.

In this context, “(un)awareness” has also emerged as a factor that increases the vulnerability of women family farmers to gender-based violence. Many of the interviewees demonstrated a limited understanding of legal instruments, such as the Maria da Penha Law, which are essential for their protection. Although they had heard of the law, mainly through the media, they admitted that they did not know its content and application in depth, revealing a significant information gap.

I’ve even heard about [the Maria da Penha law], but I don’t have... I’ve heard about it, but I’ve never really found out what it is, what it actually says, what’s in it. (M2) [about the Maria da Penha law] Oh, I hear about it on the radio and on TV, that’s all. (M3)

Corroborating the National Survey on Violence against Women, it was revealed that 75% of women have little or no knowledge of the Maria da Penha Law, while only 24% claim to know it well⁽¹¹⁾. Another study also found that women know what the Maria da Penha Law is about, but not in depth, and are unaware of the rights they are guaranteed⁽¹³⁾.

The lack of information and guidance on how to act in situations of violence reflects a lack of knowledge that affects victims and witnesses, creating insecurity and hindering intervention. This reinforces passivity in the face of incidents and increases women’s vulnerability, as those close to them feel unable to offer adequate support. In this sense, education and awareness-raising initiatives on women’s rights and how to act in cases of violence are essential to break this cycle and strengthen support networks.

Another vulnerability identified in the excerpts refers to the “blaming” represented in the excerpts:

[...] But if a woman gets beaten, if she deserves it, then it’s okay, you have to look at what she did, because a woman doesn’t get beaten for no reason [...] She must have done something, because you don’t get beaten for no reason. My husband isn’t going to come home and beat me for no reason, I must have done something, slipped up somehow, something like that. (M4)

And there’s also a woman who has a rotten finger, she only finds broken pieces. They go after her. But in the end, she doesn’t get beaten because she

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deserves it, she gets beaten because she lets herself be beaten. (M15)

Blaming is a process that internalizes social norms and holds women responsible for the abuse they suffer, suggesting that they provoked or deserved such violence. Studies show that judgment and blaming cause embarrassment, leading to silence about the violence suffered and perpetuating the cycle of vulnerability⁽¹⁴⁾.

Many participants reproduce stigmatizing judgments, believing that the victim “did something” to trigger the violent behavior. A study reinforces this view, pointing out that women are often blamed for not fulfilling traditional roles or for adopting behaviors considered inappropriate by society⁽¹⁵⁾.

The popular expression “rotten finger,” mentioned by one interviewee, is a clear example of how responsibility for violent relationships is shifted to women, suggesting that they have a personal characteristic that leads them to choose bad partners. This blames them and conditions them to accept situations of violence, attributing the blame for the aggression they suffer to their choice of abusive relationships.

Another example of blame appears in the discourse of an interviewee who suggests that women remain in abusive relationships of their own free will, ignoring the dynamics of power and control present in violent relationships. The expression “likes to be beaten” reflects a distorted view, reinforcing its normalization.

These thoughts reinforce the idea that violence is a natural or justifiable reaction to certain female behaviors. Among women who justified the use of violence, most had incomplete elementary education, highlighting the influence of education in this context. A study conducted in Ghana corroborated this relationship, finding that women with higher levels of education tend to justify violence less than those with low levels of education or no for-

mal education⁽¹⁶⁾.

Another situation of vulnerability highlighted in the analysis is “abstention,” evidenced by a culture of non-intervention in other people’s social relationships.

[...] I’m not going to say that our hands are tied, because we could do something, but it’s that old story: don’t get involved in a fight between a husband and wife! There’s still this taboo, where you know that a woman is suffering some kind of abuse, and you kind of... even though we know what to do, we’re still afraid to report it. (M2)

In this case, my sister-in-law talked to me, but as his sister, of course I didn’t support him, but I didn’t want conflict within the family. I told her she had to talk to someone who wasn’t related, because I wasn’t going to defend him. Otherwise, she wouldn’t talk to her sister, she’d talk to strangers, and it would turn into a war. (M12)

Many participants reported difficulty intervening in situations of domestic violence due to taboos and fear of reprisals. An example of this is the popular belief expressed in the saying “Briga de marido e mulher, ninguém mete a colher” (Don’t get involved in a fight between husband and wife), which leads to hesitation in reporting cases of aggression, even when aware of the fact.

This cultural perception, which treats marital conflicts as issues exclusive to the couple and where intervention is discouraged, acts as a mechanism of silence, exposing women to violence without support networks and perpetuating the cycle of abuse. Thus, social myths and stereotypes, embedded in culture, contribute to the perpetuation of violence, as they sustain notions, distortions, silencing, and prejudices that influence the collective imagination⁽¹⁷⁾.

In this way, “sticking your nose in”

is not invading privacy, but strengthening collective actions to end violence against women and ensuring that their voices are heard, rather than silenced⁽¹⁸⁾.

“Silencing” was also revealed in women’s reports as a situation that contributes to the vulnerability and perpetuation of gender-based violence in this rural context, as pointed out in the following statement:

[...] I think that in rural areas people are more restrained because they feel ashamed, thinking that everyone will find out: “Oh, let’s not talk [about violence] because everyone will find out” [...] (M17)

The national survey on violence against women reveals that most Brazilian women (62%) believe that victims of assault rarely report cases⁽¹¹⁾. In rural areas, this dynamic is even more intense due to the fear that “everyone will find out,” since the lack of anonymity in small communities, marked by the proximity between residents, discourages women from reporting violence. Women in situations of domestic violence often report feeling ashamed when exposing their experiences, especially in front of people they know⁽¹⁹⁾.

Another aspect that keeps violence silent is the difficulty many women have in recognizing the situations they experience as violence, as a consequence of its historical normalization⁽²⁰⁾. One study found that many elderly rural women tend to minimize acts that do not involve physical violence, such as disrespect, defamation, and other forms of aggression, believing that such behaviors can be overlooked and accepted as “natural”⁽¹⁴⁾.

In this context, some interviewees perceive violence against women as non-existent or less frequent than in urban areas. The following excerpts illustrate this view:

No interior é mais difícil de ver casos de violência, geralmente o que acontece é na cidade que tem isso aí. Uma grande diferença no interior, e depois tem menos gente também. Geralmente os casos que tem é na cidade, né? No interior é muito difícil. Eu não conheço ninguém, pelo menos, no interior. (M15)

There isn't much violence in the countryside, but I think there's more in the city... who knows why? I don't know if it's because they work away from home and meet other people, or something like that. (M23)

However, this perception does not reflect the absence of violence, but rather its invisibility. The lack of identification of these crimes in rural areas is related to the silence imposed on victims, who, isolated and distant, do not report the attacks. Fear, economic dependence, lack of family and social support, and scarcity of information reinforce this silence, contributing to the invisibility of violence⁽²¹⁾.

Rural areas are associated with an image of tranquility that does not necessarily reflect the reality experienced by many women. This “invisibility” transforms violence in rural areas into a private matter, restricted to the domestic sphere. This makes it difficult for women to access adequate support, increasing their vulnerability and hindering their reception by protection networks. The absence of reports further aggravates this situation.

In addition, the “isolation” characteristic of rural areas also emerges as a situation that increases women's vulnerability to gender-based violence. This isolation is conditioned by the physical and geographical characteristics of rural areas, manifested by the distance between homes and restricted social interactions, which makes confronting violence even more challenging⁽²²⁾.

This geographical isolation makes

violence less noticeable, as the long distances between homes and limited interaction between neighbors allow it to occur without witnesses or the possibility of intervention. As mentioned by one interviewee, violence is “more hidden” in rural areas, while in urban areas, the proximity between homes makes it easier for neighbors to notice conflicts, intervene, or report the situation. The following reports reflect this perspective:

[...] in rural areas, it [violence] is more hidden [...]. In the city, [when] people are fighting in a house, the neighbors hear it. That's why I say it's more exposed [violence], and it's easier to find out about it. (M17)

I don't think so [there is violence in the community]. It's just that there are few neighbors here, you can't see the houses. They are far apart [from each other]. (M33)

However, the isolation of participants is not limited to geography, but also involves restrictions on social interaction. The low participation of women in associations, mothers' clubs, unions, and other community groups reduces their opportunities to establish support networks and interact with other women, which are fundamental for individual and collective empowerment.

The experience of social exclusion keeps these women in an informationally restricted environment⁽¹⁸⁾. In this context, support networks, such as family and friends, play a key role in providing social and emotional support, encouraging victims to report abuse and seek justice, and reducing the fear of stigmatization⁽²³⁾. Studies indicate that being welcomed by other women is a decisive factor in victims of violence seeking help. Many were only able to overcome barriers and react to aggression due to the encouragement and support of women in the commu-

nity, relatives, or friends⁽¹⁸⁾.

The evidence presented reveals the complexity of gender-based violence in rural areas, marked by multiple interrelated factors that sustain a network of vulnerabilities and make it difficult to break the cycle. One limitation of this study is the sensitive nature of the topic, which may have caused hesitation or discomfort on the part of participants when reporting more profound or detailed experiences. Despite this, we believe that the research offers relevant contributions to the identification of situations that make women family farmers particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that female family farmers in rural areas face a number of situations that increase their vulnerability to gender-based violence, including: (lack of) shelter, (lack of) knowledge, blame, abstention, silencing, invisibility, and isolation. These elements are linked to structural and cultural conditions that limit access to information, institutional support, and reporting.

It is recommended that public policies and actions to combat violence against women be formulated taking into account the reality of rural areas, with the expansion of services, access to information, and the strengthening of local support networks. Future research could broaden the geographical scope and explore the intersection of social markers such as race, age, class, and sexual orientation, deepening the understanding of the multiple layers of vulnerability that women in rural areas experience.

It is suggested that future research expand the geographical scope and deepen the analysis of social markers that cut across women's experiences, such as race, age, and social class.

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