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**Brazil: Land Ownership for Women is Critical for Food Security**

Brazil is a vast country, occupying half of South America’s land mass. It consists of wetlands, low mountains, tropical landscapes, and savannas. Brazil is known for its production of coffee, sugarcane, soybeans, corn, cotton, orange juice, and meat (*USDA ERS - Brazil*, n.d.). Brazil has a large urban population with around 88% of the people living in urban areas (Statista, 2024). Family is valued in Brazilian culture, and it is common for multiple generations to live within one household. Brazil has approximately 217,422,446 people, half of which are women.

According to Onsrud et al. (2006), “the wellbeing of women is essential to the wellbeing of Brazil’s populace”. Only 56% of Brazilian women earn money, and the traditional roles women often undertake such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the family are generally underpaid and undervalued. (Canineu, 2020). Rural women can be isolated and are at a high risk of domestic violence or financial abuse. Many rural women are active farm workers but are poorly paid and do not have ownership rights in their farms. Lack of property results in lack of power, keeping women from reaching their full potential.

Land ownership gives Brazilian women a chance in an otherwise patriarchal society, but there are challenges for female landowners. One challenge, that is not limited to women farmers, is corporate farming. Corporate farming is a threat to small and mid-size family farms. The Brazilian government who was once in favour of extensive production farms is now withdrawing their laws or policies which had favoured large corporations and had made it difficult for small-scale farms to thrive (Onsrud et al., 2006). Even though policies have changed, progress is slow. A social movement, the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, works to redistribute land to small scale Brazilian farmers (McCowan, 2014). MST says the government has been “slow and ineffectual” with their actions, so they pressure the government into completing their requests (McCowan, 2014). In Brazil, 3% of the population owns over 2/3 of all the land cultivatable land (Land Rights for Women and Vulnerable Groups in Brazil, 2017). Still, Brazilian family farms produce roughly 70% of the nation’s food using only 25% of the tillable land (Scherer, 2019). Family farms, especially those owned and operated by women are a key part of ensuring food security in Brazil.

Challenges:

The three main factors that contribute to the challenges Brazilian women in agriculture face are societal norms and stereotypes, economic or legal obstacles, and educational limitations.

Societal norms and stereotypes (called “qualidade” in Brazil) are hurdles to land ownership by women, even when there are no legal or financial barriers. According to Onsrud et al. (2006) qualidade is “the importance of race, the large influences of religious institutions, and culturally formed gender roles”. A human’s qualidade affects how they are treated and viewed in society and the opportunities they are given. Women and particularly black women are discriminated against the most. For example, black women account for 66% of obstetric violence and 69% of all women murdered by men are black (*Black Women, the Most Oppressed and Exploited in Brazil*, 2022). The violence towards these Brazilian women is disproportionately high, considering they make up only about 10% of the population (Belandi & Gomes, 2024).

The lack of formal documentation of marriages can compromise women’s claims to family land. In parts of Brazil, over 50% of spousal relationships were undocumented. (Chaves, 2018). This can make it exceedingly difficult for women to register their land rights, especially following the demise of the relationship or death of her partner.

Even though there are some laws maintaining gender equality, equal land inheritance between males and females, and equal land rights for surviving spouses, there is still a definite theme of male dominance (Scot et al., 2024). In cases where succession is contested, it is still common for notaries and the Brazilian justice system to favour men’s claims over women’s. (Chaves, 2018)

In terms of economic and legal obstacles, money and financial services can be an issue for rural women. There are limited financial services in rural Brazil. With the additional social, economical, and educational barriers facing women, they usually have little to no financial aid (*Women’s Access to Rural Finance: Challenges and Opportunities*, 2019). This makes it difficult for Brazilian family farmers, especially women, to get loans. For the few who do have access to financial institutions, interest rates can be up to 70% (Inc, n.d.).

Limited education reduces access to credit. Illiteracy levels, worldwide, are highest among rural women (FAO, 2019). Even some girls who have the opportunity to attend primary school eventually drop out as teenagers to help their families, while their male relatives continue their education (Winfield, 2020). Women with poorer education and limited literacy will struggle with financial procedures, for most are written. Documents such as cheques, statements, contracts, and letters are difficult to understand (*Women’s Access to Rural Finance: Challenges and Opportunities*, 2019).

Why This Matters:

The contributions of women are beneficial to many aspects of life including economic, social, political, public, family, health, safety, and overall community wellbeing (*Women Farmers Quantitatively Linked to Better Community Well-being*, 2024). Studies in the US found women farmers not only improved the wellbeing of their communities, but also those of neighboring communities. Women invest 90% on average of their profits back into their family (*Women Own Less Than 20% of the World’s Land. It’s Time to Give Them Equal Property Rights*, 2020). However, it is important to note stereotypes, gender discrimination, and certain policies can limit women’s impacts.

Women are customarily responsible for their family and making sure everyone is healthy, fed and clean. As Claudia Schmidt states, “We know from previous qualitative research that women farmers tend to enter into farming for different reasons than men and often make decisions with the greater good in mind” (“Women Farmers Quantitatively Linked to Better Community Well-being ...”).

Moreover, when women are landowners, they gain better control over their households, improve their children’s health and futures, and food security is improved. When women own land, they are less likely to be in an abusive relationship and their economic independence is greatly increased. “According to FAO, closing the gender gap in farm production and the wage gap in agricultural employment would “increase global gross domestic product by nearly $1 Trillion and reduce the number of food insecure people by 45 million”” (*Gender Inequalities in Food and Agriculture Are Costing World $1 Trillion: FAO*, 2023). A recent study in Ghana found when more land was registered under a women’s name, the family had a higher food budget (*Issue Brief: Land Rights and Food Security*, 2012). Women with secure land titles also have an influence on what crops they can grow. This is extremely important as women tend to plant crops which are nutritious and beneficial to the family compared to male landowners who tend to plant crops which have a better financial value (*Issue Brief: Land Rights and Food Security*, 2012). In Nepal, they found when children live in homes where the mother owns land, they are half as likely to be under nourished (Allendorf, n.d.). Lastly, a study conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that countries where women had fewer rights and land privileges had up to 60% more malnourished children compared to countries where women have access to land. Increasing women landowners in agriculture means increased food security. If a woman has enough food, so do her children; if women have food security, their children do as well.

Adding more independent women to the business of agriculture helps achieve a more balanced society, like Brazilian farmer Maria Nilda. Maria and her daughters run their own business selling eggs, milk, chickens, fruit, and vegetables. They started making logbooks to keep track of everything they sell, exchange, or consume (*The Simple Scheme That’s Driving a Quiet Revolution for Brazil’s Family Farmers*, 2019). Logbooks have a tremendous impact on rural women all over Brazil and are helping them benefit from government policies (*The Simple Scheme That’s Driving a Quiet Revolution for Brazil’s Family Farmers*, 2019). By keeping logbooks more Brazilian women can document and monetize their contributions to the family’s income. This is important as it recognizes women’s contributions and stops their achievements from being downplayed.

Clearly, there are social and economic benefits to increasing women’s ownership of agricultural land in Brazil. But solving the landownership challenges for Brazilian women is not a one-step process. Programs need to address the challenges of societal norms, the legal and financial restrictions and the limited educational opportunities that rural women face. There are several programs that could be implemented to create better opportunities for Brazilian farm women such as grants, loans, mentorship, or improved rural internet access.

1. **Grants**. Government grants should be available specifically for women who are involved in the business of agriculture. The funds could specifically go to farm equipment, livestock, feed, seeds, fertilizer, fuel or other inputs. In Canada, government grants are available to farmers for water development projects, livestock management projects and the implementation of conservation farming practices. There are also grant programs for marginalized people (like Indigenous farmers) to help them overcome some of the financial hurdles. When marginalized people, like Brazilian women, are in competition with other entities that don’t face the same challenges, it is fair to use government programs to level the financial playing field.

2. **Interest-free loans**. High interest can be an insurmountable obstacle to any start-up business. Government guaranteed interest-free or low interest loans are common in other countries to help farmers manage their operating costs. In Canada, there are annual interest-free cash advances available to allow producers time to market their products rather than having to sell at inopportune times in order to meet financial obligations. Government guaranteed mortgages are helpful to first time buyers as they don’t necessarily require as high of a downpayment or as much collateral. This type of loan could be made available specifically for Brazilian women.

3. **Mentorship.** Women farmers would be given access to experienced farmers, agronomists, financial managers, and legal advisors in order to improve their odds of success. Successful farming isn’t only about growing crops or livestock. Women farmers need to be able to protect their assets, ensure that their land ownership isn’t compromised through bad policies or business deals, make good investment decisions, and manage their time effectively. This program could consist of other female farmers and entrepreneurs from around the world who are interested in sharing their experiences. The Brazilian women farmers could call, text, or email their mentors when they are struggling with something or have any questions. Face-to-face consultations could also be available where literacy is limited. In terms of funding, these non-profit organizations could be funded by a non-governmental organization who is concerned about human rights.

Canadian Feed The Children, assembled a project called SHINE (Sustainable Development, Human Rights, Inclusion and Equality) (Thiyanavadivel, 2023). This project was created to help women start their own agribusinesses in Ghana and Ethiopia. Women in Ghana and Ethiopia have similar struggles to women in Brazil. In Ghana, women make up to 70% of the agriculture work force, yet they earn under 10% of the agriculture income. In Ethiopia, only 56% of female agricultural workers get paid. For these reasons, SHINE began. SHINE provided women with productive resources, training & agriculture extension services which gave them access to farming-related information, expert advice, and support services. (Thiyanavadivel, 2023). SHINE also provides gender equality training for both men and women. A young couple, Vida & Robert, in Ghana with two young daughters participated in the program – now, they both say they better understand what each partner goes through in their “traditional roles”, and they decided to be more involved in each other’s lives. Now, Vida and Robert both farm and share the income, as well as look after their children. With the new change, they have seen a rise in their income and the amount of food they produce (Thiyanavadivel, 2023).

4. **Improved rural internet and cell phone access**. In a survey conducted in 2021 only 75% of rural homes have access to the internet (“The Number of Households With Internet Access in Brazil Has Increased,” 2022).

For women to benefit from mentorship programs or grants, they need access to information. The internet can also increase access to support programs if women are struggling with domestic or financial abuse. When women are struggling to feed their families, they don’t usually have extra money to spend on cell phones or internet. Supplying rural women with cell phones would improve their access to learning resources, such as YouTube, or put them in contact with manufacturers. Some digital enterprises such as *Buy from Women* connect women farmers to business opportunities, markets or buyers, and finance resources. To benefit from *Buy from Women*, they must have access to technology.

There are also some businesses who directly source their raw materials from farmers in Brazil. This ensures the Brazilian farmers get paid fairly for their products. Road Coffee Co. in Saskatchewan, Canada is one such company. The farmers that Road Coffee Co. buys from have better profits and allows them to invest more money into their communities. These types of business opportunities are facilitated by improved rural internet (Inc, n.d. <https://roadcoffeeco.com/> ). The phones and internet could be sponsored by a large company who provides telecommunication services as part of their charitable giving program.

Women farmers in Brazil face many challenges. Even though most legal barriers have been addressed, societal norms and discrimination, educational barriers, and economic barriers still exist. Studies prove that when women farmers own their land and manage their own farms, they have improved food security, better profits, healthier children, and improved community well-being. To improve the land ownership and farm management gender-gap for women in Brazil, I have 4 solutions: grants, interest-free and government-guaranteed loans, mentorship programs, and improved internet & cell phone access. Complex problems require multi-faceted solutions. None of these suggested solutions will be able to address all the layers of problems, but the implementation of all of them together could have significant impacts.

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