

## WOMEN'S WORK IN RURAL AREAS: INVISIBILITY, GENDER INEQUALITIES, AND SOCIAL SECURITY ISSUES

### TRABALHO FEMININO NO ESPAÇO RURAL: INVISIBILIDADE, DESIGUALDADES DE GÊNERO E PREVIDENCIÁRIAS

### EL TRABAJO DE LAS MUJERES EN LAS ZONAS RURALES: INVISIBILIDAD, DESIGUALDADES DE GÉNERO Y PROBLEMAS DE SEGURIDAD SOCIAL



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#### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze how scientific production has addressed the invisibility of women's work in rural areas, with an emphasis on the relationships between work, gender, and access to social security. The completed research was based on a systematic literature review, including authors such as Santos, Lefebvre, Massey, Wanderley, Tuan, and Martins. Twenty-two academic studies were selected, including articles, theses, dissertations, and undergraduate theses, prioritizing productions that addressed the institutional recognition of rural women and their right to retirement. The materials were analyzed using analytical note-taking, which allowed for the identification of recurring theoretical approaches, methodologies, and results. The results showed that exclusion from social security and the invisibility of women's work constituted structural phenomena, reinforced by patriarchal practices and the absence of policies sensitive to the reality of women in rural areas. It was concluded that theoretical advances and the strengthening of a critical and feminist approach were fundamental for the understanding and effective recognition of the rights of rural women.

**Keywords:** Rural Area. Women's Work. Invisibility.

#### RESUMO

Este trabalho teve como objetivo analisar como a produção científica abordou a invisibilidade do trabalho feminino no espaço rural, com ênfase nas relações entre trabalho, gênero e acesso à previdência social. A pesquisa, concluída, fundamentou-se em revisão bibliográfica sistemática, contemplando autores como Santos, Lefebvre, Massey, Wanderley, Tuan e Martins. Foram selecionados 22 estudos acadêmicos, entre artigos, teses, dissertações e TCCs, priorizando produções que trataram do reconhecimento institucional das mulheres rurais e de seu direito à aposentadoria. Os materiais foram analisados por meio de fichamento analítico, o que permitiu identificar abordagens teóricas, metodologias e resultados recorrentes. Os resultados evidenciaram que a exclusão previdenciária e a invisibilidade do trabalho das mulheres constituíram fenômenos estruturais, reforçados por práticas patriarcais e pela ausência de políticas sensíveis à realidade feminina no campo.

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Concluiu-se que os avanços teóricos e o fortalecimento de uma abordagem crítica e feminista foram fundamentais para a compreensão e o reconhecimento efetivo dos direitos das mulheres rurais.

**Palavras-chave:** Espaço Rural. Trabalho Feminino. Invisibilidade.

## **RESUMEN**

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar cómo la producción científica ha abordado la invisibilidad del trabajo de las mujeres en las zonas rurales, con énfasis en las relaciones entre trabajo, género y acceso a la seguridad social. La investigación se basó en una revisión sistemática de la literatura, que incluyó a autores como Santos, Lefebvre, Massey, Wanderley, Tuan y Martins. Se seleccionaron veintidós estudios académicos, entre artículos, tesis, disertaciones y trabajos de fin de grado, priorizando aquellos que abordaban el reconocimiento institucional de las mujeres rurales y su derecho a la jubilación. Los materiales se analizaron mediante la toma de notas analíticas, lo que permitió identificar enfoques teóricos, metodologías y resultados recurrentes. Los resultados mostraron que la exclusión de la seguridad social y la invisibilidad del trabajo de las mujeres constituían fenómenos estructurales, reforzados por prácticas patriarcales y la ausencia de políticas sensibles a la realidad de las mujeres en las zonas rurales. Se concluyó que los avances teóricos y el fortalecimiento de un enfoque crítico y feminista eran fundamentales para la comprensión y el reconocimiento efectivo de los derechos de las mujeres rurales.

**Palabras clave:** Zona Rural. Trabajo de Mujeres. Invisibilidade.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Geography, as a field of knowledge, has historically been dedicated to unveiling the multiple dimensions of space, overcoming the traditional view that conceived it only as a static scenario or a mere support for human actions. Under the influence of Critical Geography, especially from the 1970s onwards, authors such as Lefebvre (1974) and Santos (1996) consolidated the understanding of space as a historical, relational construction permeated by power relations. From this perspective, space is neither neutral nor given, but the result of disputes, interests and social processes that are expressed both in the urban and in the rural.

In the context of the Brazilian rural space, such an approach allows us to highlight how patriarchal, capitalist and institutional practices have historically produced inequalities, exclusions and silencing, especially with regard to the role of women. The countryside, more than a space for agricultural production, is a living space, crossed by land conflicts, labor relations, and forms of social organization that make women's work invisible and make it difficult for women to access basic rights, such as rural retirement, as demonstrated by Castilho (2018) and Moreira (2022).

From this perspective, the understanding of labor relations in capitalism dispenses with the interpretation of the ways in which subjects are inserted in the world of work, and it should be noted that this inclusion does not occur in a homogeneous way, since "factors of gender, race/ethnicity and generation mark the world of work in a deep and constant way" (CHERON, 2010, p. 241), in rural areas, this inequality takes on its own contours, because, although women participate in planting, harvesting, cultivating gardens and backyards, raising small animals, processing production and, often, small-scale commercialization, such activities are not always recognized as productive work, leaving women at a significant disadvantage, especially black women and those with a low level of formal education.

As Paulilo (1987) demonstrates, a significant part of these tasks is socially treated as "help", and not as work per se. This classification contributes to shifting to the field of naturalization and gratuitousness activities that are indispensable to the maintenance of the family productive unit, reinforcing the separation between what is socially recognized as productive and what is attributed to women as an extension of domestic obligations. In this sense, Brumer (2002, 2004, 2012) shows that the devaluation of women's work compromises the social and economic recognition of women's work in rural areas, while Paula (2019) highlights that this invisibility has a direct impact on access to social protection rights and policies.

In the social security plan, this dynamic is especially relevant, although Brazilian legislation recognizes the figure of the special insured as a rural worker, women still face

systematic difficulties in accessing social security rights, especially retirement due to rural age, due to the lack of recognition of women's efforts as work. The requirement to prove rural activity, associated with low female land ownership, the informality of family production and the concentration of documents in the name of men, means that many workers arrive at the moment of applying for social security without sufficient material proof of work effectively performed throughout their lives.

Although we have noticed, over the last few years, the expansion of opportunities in different occupations in the labor market for women, such expansion does not eliminate gender stereotypes, nor does it revert to equality, to the point that women who exercise or have exercised rural activities during their life trajectory are denied the right to retire, because their effort is not recognized as work.

In this context, this work carried out an analysis of the scientific production focused on geographic space, rural space and Feminist Geography, systematizing the main studies on the invisibility of women's work and its implications for women's rights and social security in the countryside. The objective of this work was to analyze how scientific production has addressed the invisibility of women's work in rural areas, with emphasis on the relations between work, gender and access to social security for rural women.

## **2 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES**

The present research is characterized as a qualitative study based on a systematic bibliographic review, aimed at the critical analysis of scientific production on geographic space, rural space, Feminist Geography and the invisibility of women's work in the field. To understand the epistemological transformations of the concept of space and its interfaces with gender issues in rural areas, the review was based on classical and contemporary authors such as Milton Santos, Henri Lefebvre, Yi-Fu Tuan, Doreen Massey, Maria Nazareth Wanderley and José de Souza Martins.

The selection of the 22 academic papers — including scientific articles, theses, dissertations, and TCCs published in journals, repositories, and events in the areas of Geography and Human Sciences — followed criteria of thematic relevance and topicality, prioritizing studies that deal with the invisibility of rural women's work, institutional recognition, and access to retirement. The documents were submitted to the analytical file technique, identifying theoretical approaches, methods used, recurrent categories and evidenced results. The analysis focused on how the concept of space is mobilized in different productions, articulating gender, space, and social security inequalities, and made it possible to map gaps, advances, and perspectives for the consolidation of a critical and feminist

geographic approach to women's work in the field. In this way, the methodological path allowed not only to gather theoretical references and empirical studies on the subject, but also to systematize interpretations that highlight the historical and institutional obstacles to the social security recognition of rural women.

### 3 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

The understanding of geographic space has undergone significant transformations throughout the history of Geography, evolving from a naturalistic conception to a critical and relational approach. In Classical Geography, influenced by authors such as Friedrich Ratzel and Vidal de la Blache, space was conceived as a physical stage where natural and human phenomena unfolded, with a strong emphasis on environmental determinism Abrão (2010).

With the advancement of Positivist Geography, especially in the twentieth century, geographic space began to be analyzed as a quantifiable and mappable surface, favoring the measurement of phenomena and the elaboration of spatial models Abrão (2010). This approach, although technically sophisticated, neglected the social, political and subjective dimensions of the production of space, treating it as a neutral datum.

From the 1970s onwards, with the emergence of Critical Geography and the influence of Marxist thought, authors such as Henri Lefebvre and Milton Santos began to consider space as a product of social relations. For Santos (1996), space is the inseparable set of systems of objects and systems of actions, being produced by and for society. This change in perspective allowed the space to be understood as a historical and ideological construction, reflecting relations of power, domination, and resistance.

In the rural context, this critical conception reveals how the agrarian space is structured based on patriarchal logics that make women's work invisible. As discussed by Castilho (2018), the exclusion of women from institutional recognition as formal workers is a concrete manifestation of the way space is selectively produced, denying them access to retirement and other social rights.

The rural space, historically associated with agricultural production and dispersed housing, is, in contemporary times, understood as a complex geographical category, marked by the plurality of functions and subjects. According to Wanderley (2001), the rural is not reduced to agricultural activity, but encompasses social relations, ways of life, knowledge and resistance that configure a living and dynamic territory. Martins (2009) also points out that the Brazilian rural space is crossed by conflicts, land inequalities and processes of exclusion that reproduce historically constructed social hierarchies. From this perspective, rural space

should be understood as a historical-social product, structured by power relations, where patriarchal and capitalist practices shape land use, division of labor and access to rights.

Parallel to these transformations, the advance of humanistic and phenomenological approaches in the following decades, with authors such as Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph, brought to light the importance of lived experience and perceived space. For Tuan (1977), space acquires meaning through the sensory, affective and practical experiences of individuals, who transform it into a place. Relph (1976), in turn, highlights that the attachment to the place, built by symbolic and everyday bonds, is essential to understand how the subjects relate to the world. From these perspectives, it is recognized that geographic space is neither neutral nor abstract, but loaded with meanings that emerge from concrete practices and experiences. This theoretical inflection opened the way for readings that value women's daily lives and symbolic relations with space, elements that would later be central in the analysis of Feminist Geography.

In this sense, Feminist Geography, as highlighted in the article published in the journal *Moreira* (2022), introduces an intersectional reading of rural space, considering gender, class, and space as inseparable dimensions of spatial production. The author argues that "the organization of the Brazilian agrarian space is marked by structural inequalities that silence the productive and reproductive contribution of women" *Moreira* (2022, p. 4). In this sense, space is no longer just a physical medium and is now understood as a condensation of social gender relations, which materialize in forms such as social security exclusion and the absence of female land ownership.

This perspective is reinforced by authors such as Massey (1994), who understand space as relational, multiple and constituted by social practices marked by hierarchies and inequalities. By analyzing the rural space from this perspective, it is possible to understand that the invisibility of women's work is not a circumstantial flaw, but a structural condition of the way space is produced and managed in the Brazilian countryside.

In this way, adopting a critical approach to the concept of space allows us to unveil the mechanisms by which rural women are excluded from public policies, especially social security, revealing that access to or denial of rights is also a matter of the production of geographic space.

#### **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The bibliographic analysis identified and systematized 22 academic works, including theses, monographs, scientific articles, TCCs and reviews, dedicated to understanding the invisibility of women's work in rural areas and its implications for retirement and social rights.

These studies present diversified methodological approaches, ranging from qualitative analyses to theoretical reviews, covering a variety of Brazilian territories and theoretical-methodological perspectives.

Empirical studies — mostly theses and monographs — carried out interviews, spatial mappings and participant observations, revealing qualitative and quantitative data on the reality experienced by peasant women. For example, Castilho (2018) investigated the trajectory of women farmers in the Ribeira Valley/SP, showing that many of these women are unable to formally prove their productive activity, despite decades of dedication, because they are excluded from official records and registers. According to the study, "the social security recognition of the farmer is strained by a patriarchal logic that disregards her daily work as a legitimate work activity" (Castilho, 2018, p. 101).

Similarly, in the work developed by Costa (2016), carried out in a rural community in Maranhão, women were interviewed who, even though they were responsible for a significant part of subsistence production and commercialization, did not have access to land in their names or records that would allow them to claim rural retirement. Many reported that their husbands were the only ones officially recognized as workers, although they fully shared the productive and domestic responsibilities.

The study by Guedes (2014) showed that rural space is still organized under patriarchal and capitalist logics, in which the sexual division of labor assigns women tasks that are less economically valued and invisible in public statistics. This model has direct consequences in old age, when, after decades of invisible contributions, many face bureaucratic and legal difficulties to access the right to retirement.

On a more theoretical level, the studies of Francisco (2020) and Moreira (2022), based on a literature review, contributed to the critical rereading of rural space and Feminist Geography. Francisco (2020), when analyzing several publications in Agrarian Geography, identified that the concept of space is still, to a large extent, treated in a neutral or masculine way, which hides gender specificities. Moreira (2022), in turn, argues that agrarian space is the product of "social relations marked by the intersection between gender, class, and territory," and that this structure shapes both work and the non-recognition of women as political and economic subjects.

Other studies, such as those by Costa (2016) and Francisco (2020), highlight that public policies for rural social security do not keep up with the reality of women, as they require forms of proof — such as invoices, union registrations, or documents in their own name — that many do not have, due to the family, informal, and collective nature of their work.

A joint reading of these studies allows us to perceive that the invisibility of women's work in the countryside is not only due to the absence of direct income or individualized remuneration, but also to the way in which the activity performed by women is socially and institutionally classified. In many cases, what sustains the family productive unit and guarantees the daily reproduction of life in the countryside continues to be understood as mere help, domestic collaboration or extension of women's obligations, and not as rural work *per se*.

Another recurring aspect in the studies analyzed is the mismatch between the concrete experience of rural women and the formal criteria of state recognition. Although they participate in planting, harvesting, caring for small animals, processing production and, often, marketing, these activities do not always appear in official documents. The requirement for individualized evidence, in contexts marked by informality, family production and low female tenure, contributes to reproducing rejections and administrative obstacles, even when the work trajectory of rural women is socially known in the community.

It is also observed, in the studies analyzed, that academic production has been shifting the debate from the mere observation of inequality to the identification of concrete mechanisms of invisibility. It is not only a matter of affirming that rural women work a lot and receive little recognition, but of demonstrating how certain family, institutional and legal arrangements contribute to erasing their condition as workers. This change is important because it allows us to understand that the problem does not lie in the absence of female participation in rural work, but in the way this participation is registered, interpreted and socially validated.

Research converges to show that rural space is made up of deep-rooted inequalities, which operate both on the material and symbolic levels. The absence of land ownership, the double or triple working day, the institutional silencing of women's work and the difficulty of access to social security are not isolated facts, but expressions of an exclusionary spatial, social and legal structure.

On the other hand, studies also reveal strategies of resistance and organization. Several studies report that the women interviewed participate in collectives, rural associations and social movements that promote political education, legal guidance and visibility actions. These initiatives have made possible, even if with limits, advances in the achievement of rights and in the recognition of women's work in the countryside.

Such experiences of resistance demonstrate that, despite historical and institutional obstacles, rural women do not occupy a merely passive position in the face of inequalities. On the contrary, they build collective forms of confrontation, share knowledge, strengthen

support networks and claim social and legal recognition. The presence of these strategies in the analyzed works also indicates that the expansion of access to rights depends not only on normative changes, but on the strengthening of spaces for participation, information and political organization in rural areas.

In order to systematize the theoretical and empirical contributions on the invisibility of women's work in rural areas, as well as its implications for access to retirement, a table was prepared that summarizes the main works analyzed in this research. Contemplating aspects such as the type of study, methods used, samples researched and the most relevant results identified in each investigation.

**Table 1**

*Main results of the analyses*

Author (Year)	Study Type	Method	Sample	Main results
Abram (2010)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	Review of the evolution of the concept of geographic space; emphasis on critical and phenomenological approaches.
Antunes (1999)	Theoretical book	Theoretical foundation	Not applicable	It broadens the notion of the working class and contributes to understanding the organization of work under capitalism, including in rural areas.
Brumer (2002)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	It discusses rural social security and gender, highlighting inequalities in the recognition of women's work and access to rights.
Brumer (2004)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	It analyzes the situation of women in agriculture, highlighting gender inequalities and devaluation of female participation in rural work.
Brumer; Angels (2012)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	It examines gender and social reproduction in family farming, showing the centrality of women's work and its undervaluation.
Castilho (2018)	Thesis	Semi-structured interviews	Unspecified; cases in SP	Invisibility of women's work; difficulties in proving retirement; patriarchal logic.
Cheron (2010)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	It shows that gender, race/ethnicity and generation unequally mark the insertion of subjects in the world of work.
Costa, Raíssa (2016)	TCC	Interviews	5 women in Maranhão	Absence of ownership; informality prevents retirement; invisible productive role.
Guedes (2014)	Thesis	Qualitative study, social analysis	Unspecified; Settlements	Sexual division of labor; economic invisibility; difficulties in retirement.
Francis (2020)	Review Article	Literature review	Not applicable	Neutral or male rural space; it hides gender inequalities.
Junqueira; Lima (2008)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	It discusses public policies for family farming and points out historical inequalities among rural workers, including gender.

Author (Year)	Study Type	Method	Sample	Main results
Kreter; Bacha (2006)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	It evaluates the equity of social security in the Brazilian rural environment, contributing to understanding inequalities in access to social security rights.
Moreira (2022)	Critical Review Article	Literature review	Not applicable	Agrarian space as an intersectional construction; structural inequalities of gender, class and territory.
Lefebvre (1974)	Theoretical Book	Theoretical foundation	Not applicable	Space as social, ideological and material production.
Massey (1994)	Theoretical Book	Theoretical foundation	Not applicable	Relational space, multiple and marked by social hierarchies.
Martins (2009)	Theoretical Book	Theoretical foundation	Not applicable	Rural space marked by conflicts, exclusions and historical inequalities.
Paula (2019)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	It discusses the trajectory of rural women's struggle for recognition and rights, highlighting political mobilization and social visibility.
Paulilo (1987)	Theoretical Article	Literature review	Not applicable	It problematizes the notion of "light work", showing how rural female work is devalued and treated as help.
Relph (1976)	Theoretical Book	Theoretical foundation	Not applicable	Importance of attachment to the place and experience of the space.
Santos (1996)	Theoretical Book	Theoretical foundation	Not applicable	Space as a set of objects and actions, social production of reality.
Wanderley (2001)	Book Chapter	Historical and theoretical review	Not applicable	Rural space as a living territory, marked by ways of life, knowledge and resistance.

Source: Org. MOREIRA, L. G. F. 2025

The integrated analysis of the information presented in chart 1 allows us to perceive the methodological diversity and thematic breadth of research on the subject. It is observed that qualitative studies, especially those that used interviews and documentary analysis, provide fundamental data on the real conditions experienced by women in rural areas, highlighting social security exclusion and the invisibility of work.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research carried out evidenced the complexity of the social and spatial dynamics that structure the Brazilian rural space, demonstrating how scientific production has been expanding the understanding of the invisibility of women's work in the countryside. The methodological path, of a bibliographic nature, allowed us to analyze, from different theoretical and empirical perspectives, the multiple dimensions of gender inequalities in the rural context, especially with regard to institutional recognition, the struggle for rights and the barriers historically imposed on rural women.

By gathering and confronting contributions from Critical Geography, Feminist Geography and the social sciences, the research contributes to the strengthening of an

approach sensitive to the specificities of rural women's work, highlighting both the barriers faced and the strategies of resistance and organization carried out by them. The results presented highlight the need for public policies and new institutional practices that recognize and value the role of women in the agrarian space, collaborating for the construction of a fairer and more inclusive scientific and social field.

It was possible to perceive that the formal requirements for the recognition of women's rural activity, although institutionally presented as technical criteria, do not always correspond to the concrete forms of organization of life and work in rural areas. In many contexts, family production, self-consumption, collective work and informality in productive relations make it difficult to create documents in the name of women, contributing to the permanence of bureaucratic obstacles and the denial of rights. Thus, the non-recognition of women's work in the countryside cannot be understood as a simple individual failure to prove it, but as an expression of a historical logic that has little valued the centrality of women's action in the reproduction of rural life.

Another relevant aspect concerns the contribution of Geography to the interpretation of this problem. By understanding the rural space as a historical and social product, crossed by power relations, the geographical analysis allows us to reveal that unequal access to rights is also manifested territorially. The fact that many women do not have land in their names, the unequal distribution of productive and reproductive tasks, and the difficulty of insertion in formal spaces of representation demonstrate that the invisibility of women's work is directly related to the way the Brazilian agrarian space has been structured and managed over time.

The research analyzed also showed that, despite the numerous obstacles, rural women build practices of resistance, mobilization and collective demands. Participation in associations, unions, social movements and community networks shows that the recognition of rights does not occur only through legal norms, but also through political action and the social visibility achieved on a daily basis. This data is particularly important because it breaks with passive views of rural women and reaffirms their condition as historical subjects and agents of transformation.

Finally, it is noteworthy that this study does not exhaust the theme, but reinforces the need for deepening research that articulates gender, space, feminization of work and public policies, especially from regional perspectives, empirical analyses and direct listening to rural women. Future investigations may contribute to broaden the understanding of the contemporary effects of inequalities that cross the rural environment, as well as to subsidize institutional practices that are more sensitive to the reality of rural workers. It is hoped, therefore, that this research will contribute not only to the academic debate, but also to the

strengthening of critical perspectives committed to social justice, recognition and dignity for women who live and work in the field.

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