

A BUSCA POR AUTONOMIA POR PARTE DE MULHERES AGRICULTORAS RURAIS: EXPERIÊNCIAS DE TRABALHO AGROECOLÓGICO NO SIPAM-CHILÓE

THE SEARCH FOR AUTONOMY IN RURAL WOMEN FARMERS: AGROECOLOGICAL WORK EXPERIENCES IN SIPAM-CHILÓE.

LA BÚSQUEDA DE AUTONOMÍA POR PARTE DE AGRICULTORAS RURALES: EXPERIENCIAS DE TRABAJO AGROECOLÓGICO EN SIPAM-CHILÓE.

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GT5. Agricultura familiar e relações de gênero no meio rural

Resumo

O regime alimentar global não atende de forma adequada às necessidades de grande parte da população. Nesse contexto, os sistemas alimentares locais, como a agroecologia no arquipélago de Chiloé — reconhecido como um Sistema Importante do Patrimônio Agrícola Mundial (SIPAM) — revelam-se fundamentais. Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar de que maneira a participação de mulheres em circuitos curtos de comercialização de produtos agroecológicos influencia sua autonomia. Adotou-se uma metodologia etnográfica que combinou dados quantitativos e qualitativos, obtidos por meio de observação participante estruturada e entrevistas semiestruturadas. Os resultados indicam que a acumulação de capital tangível e intangível impacta positivamente a autonomia das agricultoras, permitindo-lhes gerar renda suficiente para sua subsistência e reduzir a dependência econômica e social em relação aos maridos. Ademais, as mulheres e suas famílias mantêm uma alimentação saudável, ao mesmo tempo em que preservam seu sistema alimentar tradicional. O apoio de organizações públicas e privadas mostra-se crucial nesse processo. Este trabalho é academicamente relevante e inovador, pois se fundamenta nos aportes teóricos sobre participação (Bordenave), capital e campos sociais (Bourdieu), e autonomia (Sen), além de apresentar implicações significativas para o desenho de programas e políticas públicas voltados ao empoderamento de mulheres rurais.

Palavras-chave: Participação Social. Circuitos Curtos Agroecológicos. Relações de Gênero. Capital Social e Econômico. Agricultura de Base Agroecológica.

Abstract

The global food regime does not adequately meet the needs of a large part of the population. In this context, local food systems, such as agroecology in the Chiloé archipelago, recognized as one of the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), are essential. This study aims to analyze how the participation of women in short food supply chains of agroecological products influences their autonomy. An ethnographic methodology was implemented, combining quantitative and qualitative data obtained through participant structured observation and 15 semi-structured interviews. The results show that the accumulation of tangible and intangible capital positively influences the autonomy of female farmers, enabling them to generate sufficient income for their livelihood and reducing their economic and social dependence on their husbands. Furthermore, women and their families maintain a healthy diet while preserving their traditional food system. The support of public and private organizations is crucial in this process. This work is academically relevant and innovative because it aligns with important theoretical contributions, such as participation by Bordenave, capital and social fields by Bourdieu, and autonomy by Sen; and it has important implications for the design of programs and social policies aimed at empowering rural indigenous women.

Keywords: Social Participation. Agroecological Short Supply Chains. Gender. Indigenous. Alternative Agriculture.

Resumen

El régimen alimentario global no satisface adecuadamente las necesidades de gran parte de la población. En ese contexto, los sistemas alimentarios locales, como la agroecología en el archipiélago de Chiloé, reconocido como un Sistema Importante para el Patrimonio Agrícola Mundial (SIPAM), resultan fundamentales. Este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar la manera en que la participación de mujeres en circuitos cortos de comercialización de productos agroecológicos, influencia en su autonomía. Se implementó una metodología etnográfica que combinó datos cuantitativos y cualitativos obtenidos mediante observación estructurada participante y entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los resultados muestran que la acumulación de capital tangible e intangible influye positivamente en la autonomía de las agricultoras, permitiéndoles generar ingresos suficientes para su sustento y reduciendo su dependencia económica y social de sus esposos. Además, las mujeres y sus familias mantienen una alimentación saludable, mientras preservan su sistema alimentario tradicional. El apoyo de organizaciones públicas y privadas resulta crucial en este proceso. Este trabajo es relevante e innovador académicamente porque se enmarca en los aportes teóricos de la participación de Bordenave, capital y campos sociales de Bourdieu y autonomía de Sen; y tiene implicaciones importantes para el diseño de programas y políticas públicas orientadas al empoderamiento de mujeres rurales.

Palabras clave: Participación Social. Circuitos Cortos Agroecológicos. Género. Capital. Agricultura Alternativa.

1. Introduction

“Without feminism, there is no agroecology” (Naves and Fontoura 2022: 409). This is one of the phrases adopted as a main slogan by numerous women’s collectives. These authors highlight that women play a fundamental role in agroecological work. In a global context marked by the unsustainability of the global food regime, permeated by growing social inequalities (Friedmann 2009; McMichael 2009; Otero 2012), local initiatives for food production and marketing that provide opportunities for women acquire critical relevance (Valencia et al., 2021). In this regard, Oliver (2016) demonstrates that agroecology is one such initiative, exemplified by a Uruguayan cooperative that succeeded in improving the economy, nutrition, and leadership of several female farmers. Thus, various studies position agroecology as an effective alternative to strengthen local food systems and promote the autonomy of rural communities.

Agroecology is presented in the literature as an option for women to increase their autonomy. This has been evidenced by authors such as Galvão et al. (2020) and Hillenkamp (2019), who provide examples of female farmers in Brazil who have managed to enhance their economic, food, and cultural autonomy through agroecological production in their gardens.

In Chile, the Chiloé archipelago, composed of 40 islands, stands out for its adoption of agroecological practices within the framework of the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS). This designation, granted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), a dedicated United Nations agency at the forefront of global initiatives to eradicate hunger, was awarded to Chiloé agricultureⁱ in 2011 (Chile 2013), making it part of the first group of seven GIAHS sites. This initiative aims to contribute to the protection of agricultural systems with the potential to address global issues, primarily in terms of food security, livelihoods, and cultural conservation, as well as biodiversity and ecosystems worldwide (FAO 2016). Since 2005, the FAO has recognized 89 systems across 28 countriesⁱⁱ.

This paper focuses on the experiences of rural women farmers from Chiloé, many of whom are descendants of the Huilliche indigenous people, examining how their participation in short agroecological food supply chains (SAFSC) influences their autonomy. Through a detailed analysis and direct quotations from the farmers, the various ways in which they actively

engage in this social field are explored. The results lead to the conclusion that, by engaging in agroecological projects, women not only increase their income and reduce their economic dependence on men, but also acquire social and cultural capital, thereby strengthening their autonomy.

This study explores the dynamics between work, gender, and autonomy within the theoretical frameworks of Juan Bordenave, Pierre Bourdieu, and Amartya Sen. From this perspective, authentic participation is understood as active, conscious, and transformative engagement (Bordenave, 1983). This type of participation facilitates access to greater tangible and intangible capital, a link grounded in Bourdieu's theory of capital and social fields. According to Bourdieu, the accumulation of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital enables individuals to access more opportunities across various social fields (Bourdieu, 2003, 2007). This trend enhances agents' capacity and freedom to act according to their own choices, thereby materializing the concept of autonomy proposed by Sen (1999), which is adopted in this paper.

An ethnographic methodology was implemented in order to understand the way that female farmers have experienced changes in their economic, labor, food, cultural, and social autonomy. These findings are relevant both to science and society, as they have important implications for the design of social policies and development programs aimed at promoting gender equity, autonomy, and the empowerment of rural indigenous women in Latin America.

2. Methodology

The agroecological practices carried out by the female farmers of Chiloé are shaped by traditions, beliefs and behaviors inherent to their culture, which made it necessary to approach this study in a profound manner. An ethnographic methodology was chosen, as it allows for an understanding of the complexity of social phenomena as they occur in their everyday context and exposes the true spirit of the participants (Angrosino, 2009). As part of the cultural immersion, the researcher resided in Chile for six months, three of which were specifically in Chiloé. A cross-sectional non-experimental approach was applied to analyze the variables at a specific point in time (Moscarella, Vásquez, López 2018).

Through the support of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Government of Chile, and their local agency, the Agricultural Development Institute (INDAP) of the Los Lagos Region, and with the prior consent of each female farmer, a non-probabilistic, purposive, and voluntary sample of 15 female farmers was selected. The majority of these farmers are indigenous, hold the SIPAM-Chiloé certification, and reside and work in the rural areas of various communes in Chiloé.

For the collection of primary data, structured participant observation and semi-structured interviews were employed, designed according to the participants' profiles (Sampieri, Collado, Lucio, 2014) and the variables of the objective. The interviews were conducted using an open-ended question guide, and the observations were also based on a previously established guide. Additionally, auxiliary instruments such as field notes, old newspaper articles, recordings, and photographs were used.

The researcher actively participated in the daily lives of five families, who hosted him in their homes. In this way, the researcher was involved in various activities such as animal care and feeding, composting, planting and cultivating vegetables, seed selection for storage, as well as the preparation, delivery, and sale of products at local markets and to customers at home.

The researcher also took part in the preparation of traditional dishes in the kitchen, shellfishingⁱⁱⁱ, shore fishing, apple picking, and the production of *chicha*, as well as in the collection of organic waste for animal feed and fertilizer preparation. Additionally, the researcher participated in a communal work effort (*minga*) to rebuild a collapsed greenhouse, among other activities.

He also participated as an observer in several meetings, such as: the 2024 planning meeting of the Territorial Council of SIPAM Ancud, the Tourism Entrepreneurship Fair Ruta de Los Cisnes de Caulín, a work meeting of the Chilwe Cooperative, the monthly meeting of the Communal Union of Rural Women of Ancud, the planning meeting of the municipal fair of Ancud, the meeting of residents of El Estero, the presentation of the results of GIAHS and the presentation of the book *Honrando el Pasado, Sembrando el Futuro* and the documentary *Chiloé Patrimonio Agrícola Mundial*, as part of the program of Dissemination for the Strengthening and Development of the GIAHS site and the SIPAM-Chiloé certification of INDAP Los Lagos.

The Image 1 shows, using red dots, the locations of the properties of the female farmers who participated in the research.

Image 1 – Map of female farmers locations



Source: own creation based on Wikipedia, open use license

3. Analysis and discussion of the results

3.1 Forms of female participation in agroecology

In order to understand how the autonomy of female farmers in Chiloé is influenced by their participation in agroecological work, it is crucial to analyze some key characteristics of their profile. Data collection reveals that, on average, these women are 53 years old. Sixty-seven percent are married, 20% are single, 7% are divorced, and 7% are widowed. Furthermore, 87% are mothers, with an average of two children, aged 30, most of whom no longer live with them. As a result, 67% report that no one is financially dependent on them. Regarding their educational background, 9% have completed university, 36% have attended secondary education, and 55% have completed it. Additionally, 53% of the participants identify as heads of household. Some indicated that their role as head of household has been established in agreement with their husbands, as they perceive themselves as equals in terms of responsibilities and rights, reflecting a notable sense of empowerment.

The participants are involved in the SAFSC as independent producers and sellers. In their role as producers, it is worth highlighting that 58% of them belong to the first group certified as GIAHS/SIPAM in 2011. Eighty percent identify as farmers, while the remaining 20% define themselves as housewives. In general, half of their production is intended for sale, and the other half for self-consumption. On average, the participants have dedicated the last 24 years (i.e., 43% of their lives) to agriculture, working on lands mostly inherited, with areas ranging from 1 to 60 hectares. Sixty percent continue the agricultural tradition of their ancestors, while the remaining 40% transitioned to agroecology through the example and invitation of friends, neighbors, or family members.

Being a farmer in Chiloé is no longer a source of stigma. In discussions, people explained that in the past, "people from the continent"^{iv} strongly discriminated against Chiloé farmers, erroneously perceiving them as backward and lazy people, from whom cheap labor could be exploited. Several participants emphasized that being a Chiloé farmer is now a source of pride, identification and recognition. In fact, during conversations with neighbors of several participants, they referred to them literally as "entrepreneurs." Attitudes like these demonstrate that, as a result of their work in agroecology, these women are no longer seen solely as caregivers, wives, or mothers, but as active agents in the economy of the archipelago.

Chiloé possess its own food system, deeply influenced by ancestral traditions and the local Indigenous worldview. During visits to their orchards, vegetable gardens and greenhouses, located outside of their homes, the care, affection, respect and special dedication that the female farmers invest in these spaces were undeniable. It was common to observe smiles and pride as they showcased the details of these areas. This closeness contributes to the fact that all the participants believe their work in the fields allows them enough time to spend with their families and friends.

In these spaces, they cultivate a wide variety of vegetables, such as Chilean garlic, potatoes, turnips, carrots, pumpkins, radishes, onions, squash, chili peppers, various types of lettuce, cabbage, fava beans, beets, cauliflower, broccoli, cilantro, parsley, chard in different colors, watercress, arugula, cucumbers, among many others. They also produce legumes such as peas, beans, barley, and quinoa, as well as some fruits, including various types of tomatoes, apples, rosalia, raspberries, strawberries, blackberries, and blueberries. Additionally, wild fruits such as murta, calafate, maqui, and michay are cultivated. Medicinal and aromatic herbs, such as lemon verbena, rue, rosemary, sage, mint, lavender, chamomile, and oregano, along with various ornamental flowers were also found.

The optimal season for planting, harvesting and selling their production begins in the summer (October) and ends in the spring (March). Due to their location in southern Chile, winter temperatures range from 3°C to 12°C, with frequent winds and rains that, along with the breezes and winds from the Pacific Ocean, intensify the feeling of cold. These conditions drastically limit production and sales during the winter. As a result, most allocate the first harvest to stock their own stores, while the remainder is sold. Additionally, they save money during the summer to purchase firewood and food items not produced in their gardens.

All participants raise animals, with the most common being pigs, sheep (including lambs), chickens, ducks, and 33% also owning cattle. These animals receive meticulous care and are housed in spaces designed to ensure their comfort during the winter. The breeding of these animals primarily allows them to use manure for the production of natural fertilizers, as well as to obtain wool, meat, milk and cheese. Additionally, many of their properties have areas dedicated to environmental conservation, which are also used for agritourism.

Historically, women from Chiloé have gained prominence as farmers. This is somehow due to the lack of employment opportunities in Chiloé during the 1940s, which led many men to migrate to Argentine Patagonia to work on livestock estates^v. This absence on the island forced women to take on the primary responsibility for the care and production of their land.

The literature in regards this subject, reveals that the work of female farmers is commonly considered merely as "assistance" in their roles as mothers and wives (Galvão et al. 2020). This is not the case for the participants in this study. Partly because 30% of their husbands work full-time with them in their lands, 50% have other jobs but still contribute significantly to agricultural tasks, and only 20% of husbands do not participate in agriculture. According to the participants, this situation is primarily due to two factors. First, the financial support they receive from the Chilean state through project allocations allows the husbands to work alongside their wives in the field, as these incomes are sufficient. Second, many husbands take pride in the local recognition their wives receive from family, friends, neighbors, government and international organizations as the FAO. During family visits, several husbands proudly expressed their admiration for the work and recognition of their wives. Furthermore, all participants confirmed that, when additional labor is needed, they can rely on the help of family members, whether children, mothers, siblings, other relatives or even neighbors through *mingas*^{vi}.

Their production is sufficient for family consumption, storage for the winter and the sale of surplus. None of them currently export, as their production volume is relatively low for such an activity. However, some send their products to other cities in Chile, where recurring customers request handicrafts and textiles.

Through ancestral practices which they consider common, they produce in an agroecological manner. In this regard, Participant 5 comments: "We, Chilotes have agroecology in our blood. Of course, now it's called agroecology, but the people here have always done it... it's like in the genes of a Chilote to work this way" (personal communication, March 22, 2024).

The participants demonstrate a clear awareness of the positive impact their production has on the local environment, which is reflected in their practices. In this regard, 67% stated that they care for the environment primarily by using exclusively natural, handmade, and organic fertilizers, such as compost^{vii} and bokashi^{viii}. For them, the origin of their food is of utmost importance. In this context, Participant 14 explains: "We use our own fertilizers, which we make ourselves... one knows how it was made... how the vegetables were produced and fertilized" (personal communication, April 18, 2024). They also highlighted practices such as recycling, evident in all households, as well as reforestation with native species, soil and river conservation and respect for animals, forests, seas, and land. Additionally, they mentioned the limited use of industrial machinery.

3.2 Agroecology and economic capital

SAFSC are described in the literature as alternative networks for sustainable local trade, both ecologically and socially. Saravia (2020) defines them in the context of the Valparaíso region, Chile. The author points out that SAFSC are developed in local markets where there is physical and relational proximity between producers and consumers, who, in an inclusive and participatory manner, receives important information about the food they are purchasing. In Chiloé, SAFSC represent key spaces for the accumulation of economic capital by female farmers. For 67% of households, agroecology is the primary source of income; for 20%, it constitutes an additional source and only 13% primarily sustain their economy through income

generated by the husband's work outside the farm. The participants demonstrate a strong set of sales techniques, mainly as a result of training they have received.

In Chiloé, sales within the SAFSC occur in various ways, where the main recurring buyers are neighbors, friends and family. The most common modality was direct sales at their homes and properties, practiced by 70% of the participants. Through this approach, they are able to show their clients the place and process of food production, allowing them to experience the aromas, colors and landscapes of the surroundings. They farmers expressed benefits, such as customer loyalty, trust, attention, and personalized service. In this context, Participant 6 comments:

That experience is wonderful because it gives space to that, to talk and tell them how we plant our products... putting love and care into it... They react very positively, it gives them confidence to buy from us... it's very beautiful, very beautiful. (personal communication, March 16, 2024)

Some sales are also made through social media, since 87% of them use virtual tools such as WhatsApp and Instagram to offer their products and organize deliveries, which are typically carried out in the town center. Many sell regularly to families and restaurants. Several participants indicate that, since the pandemic, this modality has declined, being replaced mainly by sales at home. 60% of the female farmers also sell at fairs organized by the municipality or agricultural groups. Some of these fairs include cultural attractions such as live music and other folk events and are held in strategic locations within the rural area or at the center of the towns.

The female farmers also demonstrated a clear understanding of their costs and profits. In fact, several of them indicated that they do not sell to intermediaries, as it would reduce their profits. Moreover, most have limited production, which makes it difficult to meet that type of demand. By operating in the retail sector, they have the ability to independently organize the volume, price, and type of sale. Only one farmer sells to a local supermarket.

They all agree that the quality of their products is the main reason for their sales. Several buyers mentioned that they purchase these products because they perceive a difference in taste, aroma, and appearance; additionally, knowing that they were produced without chemicals and with natural fertilizers provides them with greater peace of mind.

The participants demonstrate creativity, with numerous ideas to improve their autonomy. In this regard, they diversify their sources of income through activities such as crafts, wool weaving from their own sheep, the production of fermented quinoa beer, wild fruit liqueurs, garlic paste, and the sale of seedlings, among others. Agrotourism plays an important role, as 60% also utilize their homes and fields for this purpose, offering visitors the opportunity to participate in the planting and harvesting of crops, which are then enjoyed at the end of the day in traditional dishes alongside the farmers. Some even offer accommodation services. These activities are recognized by the GIAHS certification, as they contribute to the preservation of local culture without harming the environment.

A fundamental element for the success of agroecology in Chiloé is the support that farmers receive from the State, through the representation of INDAP in the region. All of the participants have received state subsidies for the implementation of projects aimed at improving their production, such as greenhouses, orchards, composting systems, animal shelters, irrigation systems, animal protection, storage facilities, among others.

3.3 Agroecology and social capital

The observations allowed for the identification of the ways in which the participants act as agents of change, primarily through the accumulation of social capital. All of them belong to various organizations with economic and social objectives, such as the Territorial Council of SIPAM in Ancud, the Ruta de Los Cisnes, the Chiloé Organic Trade Association, the Group of Organic Producers, the Chilwe Cooperative, the Punta Chilen Cooperative, the Ancud Area Agency Committee (CADA), the Rural Women's Communal Union, the Amapolas de Puntra Women's Group, the Chiloé Creative Women's Group, neighborhood associations, and various groups advocating for indigenous rights, such as the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (ANAMURI).

80% of the participants hold leadership roles, such as presidents and local leaders. This enables them to express satisfaction with comments like that of Participant 10: "It is wonderful to see that the little contribution you made has borne fruit... it is done from the heart, because it is felt and innate" (personal communication, April 30, 2024). Observations made in meetings as an observer allowed for an analysis of the importance of active participation by the farmers, where their voices are heard, and decisions are made collectively, democratically, and autonomously. These meetings were predominantly attended by women, and reflected attitudes of teamwork, empathy, solidarity, democracy, leadership, and autonomy.

Group organization with other farmers, as well as with public and private agents, through fairs, meetings, training sessions, and technical tours, contributes to the creation of social networks. As these social networks expand, so does the well-being and empowerment of individuals (Woolcock & Narayan, 2006). 60% of the participants perceive that their involvement in SIPAM-Chiloé positively influences their role as local leaders. It was common to hear from them that there is a bidirectional relationship, in which their role as women leaders also strengthens their performance as farmers.

3.4 Agroecology and cultural capital

Participation in agroecology also enhances cultural capital, understood here as the set of knowledge, skills, and techniques valued within its context (Bourdieu, 2007). All participants state that they complement their ancestral knowledge and practices with new techniques acquired through training sessions facilitated by various institutions focused on the development of rural women. These include the regional INDAP, the Local Development Program (PRODESAL), the Chiloé Education and Technology Center (CET) located in the municipality of Chonchi, the Foundation for the Promotion and Development of Women (PRODEMU), the Office of Productive Development, and the Department of Women in local municipalities; as well as initiatives aimed at supporting the productive systems of indigenous peoples, such as the National Corporation for Indigenous Development (CONADI) and the Indigenous Territorial Development Program (PDTI).

INDAP and the Chiloé CET stand out as the main training providers. On the one hand, INDAP Los Lagos is currently the primary responsible entity for GIAHS in Chiloé, supporting aspects such as the dissemination of agricultural work, the importance of SIPAM-Chiloé certification, training, subsidies, and other initiatives. In fact, 60% of the farmers highlight the importance of the support provided by INDAP advisors in their daily agricultural work. On the other hand, the Chiloé CET has been the main agent in terms of technical training since before the GIAHS certification. Many farmers express great gratitude, affection, and respect for the leaders and trainers of this center, to whom they attribute a significant part of the success of their agroecological practices.

As a whole, the training sessions focus on three main approaches. The first is to improve production through more efficient techniques, which the farmers positively adopt, recognizing their usefulness in managing their land, fertilizers, and livestock. The second approach relates to the improvement of their sales techniques and price setting. Several of the interviewees highlighted that their sales volume has significantly increased as a result of this support. The third approach is personal development, aimed at strengthening self-esteem, leadership, and economic independence, primarily for women. Additionally, the local municipality, through the PDTI, offered group psychological support targeted at the Huilliche indigenous communities.

The influence of these training sessions is significant both in the technical and emotional aspects of the farmers, as reflected in the comment by Participant 9, who stated that the training sessions “Yes, they are very useful... because they teach you to take risks, to believe in yourself... to empower yourself” (personal communication, April 19, 2024), and the comment by Participant 6 who stated

We began to notice that everything we did was important, that we were good farmers... there is a beautiful process of learning to love ourselves, accept ourselves, and value ourselves... to empower all of us and feel that our work is very important. (personal communication, March 16, 2024)

These initiatives create spaces in which the farmers themselves have the opportunity to train other producers. In this regard, 47% of them have provided practical training sessions, hosting visits from farmers, including those from other regions of Chile, and sharing knowledge on pest management, greenhouse construction, organic fertilizers, soil improvement, and planting, among other activities.

Their participation in agroecology also allows them to preserve the culture of the territory, which is characterized by its ancestry, mythology, cuisine, architecture, music, clothing, among other aspects. Chiloé is a prominent tourist destination, known for its architecture, in which wooden constructions prevail. One of its main attractions is its churches, sixteen of which were declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2000. In addition, Chiloé boasts other significant tourist destinations such as its beaches, penguin colonies, ancient Spanish fortifications, docks, national parks, and stilt houses. The region's worldview and mythology must also be mentioned, with roots in Huilliche indigenous beliefs now blended with influences from Spanish culture, as a result of colonization. The local mythology includes beings and deities that reflect the close relationship of the inhabitants with the ocean and the land.

Chiloé is home to Huilliche indigenous communities, whose name means "people of the south."^{ix} The inhabitants of these communities are characterized by their determination to preserve their culture, territory, and autonomy. This resistance dates back to the time of colonization, when, thanks to their geographic isolation and various strategies, they were able to resist the Spanish conquest in several instances. 53% of the participants are Huilliche, and 25% of them still speak Mapudungun, the Huilliche language. For many years, these peoples were subjected to discrimination and oppression; they were not even allowed to speak their own language, which led many to change their surnames in order to avoid being marginalized. This discrimination has significantly decreased in the past two decades, as a result of various initiatives by the Chilean state.

In June, the Huilliche New Year is celebrated, a festivity that proves the importance of women in Huilliche culture. It is exclusively the *Maestras de Paz*, wise elderly women, who are the only ones authorized to perform the prayers, a ritual in which they ask for the health and

well-being of their community. Additionally, they are also responsible for mediating and resolving conflicts that arise among the members of their people.

The observations made allowed for the identification of examples of kindness and solidarity within the Chiloé community. As part of the participant observation activities, the researcher took part in a minga aimed at rebuilding a greenhouse that had been destroyed by a strong storm affecting several women farmers in April 2024, with winds exceeding 140km/h.

Maintaining their food system is a priority for the Huilliche people. In addition to being producers and sellers, women play a fundamental role in caring for their families, the environment, and preserving their ancestral heritage. They are the masters and transmitters of traditional practices, teaching those to their children and grandchildren. One of the ancestral practices observed in 73% of households is planting according to the lunar calendar^x. In this regard, Participant 7 comments: "It is the women who pass down the ways of doing things to the new generations... there is a tremendous contribution from the women of indigenous communities in this sense" (personal communication, March 15, 2024).

In their role as transmitters of their culture, 27% of the participants are part of the *Guardians of Seeds* initiative^{xi}. They diligently store native seeds in banks located on their properties, with the aim of exchanging them with other farmers and thereby preserving Chiloé's traditional crops. Although food exchange is not a common practice, donations become regular when neighbors face needs. The various native potato varieties represent the most traditional food in the Chiloé diet, being essential in typical dishes such as *Curanto* in cooking pot^{xii} and *Milcao*. The diversity of potato species cultivated in the archipelago places Chiloé among the leading potato-producing territories around the globe (CET 2012).

The material and immaterial value of the homes was evident, where the predominant use of wood is noticeable. The Chiloé kitchen, rustic, welcoming, and warm, is the main space for rest. At its center is a wood-burning stove, used to heat food, the space, and, in some cases, the household water. The kitchen is the place where the family gathers to rest, converse, and watch the news and soap operas at night, after a long day of work.

All the participants deeply value the tranquility, autonomy, and flexibility of working hours that their fields provide. At the end of the afternoon, they typically set aside time to *tomar una once*^{xiii}, commonly with "a little mate," and homemade bread and jam^{xiv}, in the company of family, neighbors, or friends.

3.4 Agroecology and symbolic capital

These forms of participation also allow women to accumulate symbolic capital, which, although intangible, holds significant practical value (Bourdieu, 2007). They are aware of the importance of being SIPAM-certified, both for Chile and for the world, and recognize that their participation is crucial. SIPAM-Chiloé has placed labels on the farmers' properties, which has contributed to a greater appreciation of their work. Initiatives like this allow farmers in Chiloé to be perceived in a more positive way. As Participant 5 stated, "The person who practices agroecology and speaks about agroecology, is now seen in a different way, with more respect; they are even admired in some way" (personal communication, March 22, 2024).

The recognition they receive from other farmers, customers, neighbors, and family members is one of the most important motivations for them. In this regard, it is noteworthy that 93% of the participants express satisfaction with the recognition their work receives from others, which reinforces their own self-worth and self-esteem. In this sense, Participant 2 said

“There is no payment like that, when they (customers) say, ‘I loved it! I loved how you did it!... for me, that is the best payment” (personal communication, February 7, 2024).

Many of them radiated an authentic smile, full of happiness and pride, as they showed diplomas and recognitions that adorned their walls and living room furniture. As Participant 10 comments, “I feel that I am doing important work” (personal communication, April 30, 2024). These recognitions were common in 73% of the households and were awarded for their active participation in agroecological activities organized by SIPAM, INDAP Los Lagos, PRODEMU, PRODESAL, CONADI, among others. In this way, their work contributes to increasing the recognition of women, as Participant 8 expresses: “Before, the woman who worked was not recognized... the woman at home had to do everything but was not recognized, and now, yes, the woman is being recognized” (personal communication, April 26, 2024).

They mention that they are also motivated by the desire to care for the environment, while they leave an example and a legacy for a better future. Additionally, they emphasize their love for the tranquility of working surrounded by nature, where they can witness how their own hands transform their surroundings and landscapes through their agroecological work. They also noted that they are driven by the desire to care for their families through healthy food, while preserving and rescuing their local traditions.

3.4 Agroecology and autonomy

"We live from what we do in the field," expressed Participant 14, highlighting the importance of agroecology in her autonomy (personal communication, April 18, 2024). While some farmers are more actively involved than others, in general, and following the categorization of participation levels proposed by Bordenave (1983), these farmers engage in the SAFSCs at a co-management level.

In this study, autonomy is understood as the genuine ability to make decisions freely and fully (Sen, 2000). In this context, autonomy is influenced by both the tangible and intangible capital that individuals possess. Although Sen does not define specific categories of autonomy, his theoretical contributions allow it to be empirically linked to various dimensions such as labor, economic, food, cultural, and social autonomy.

"Now I am freer because I work for myself," expressed Participant 2, referring to her labor autonomy. All of the participants work their land independently, which allows them to own their total production and manage it according to their needs and goals. This autonomy grants them the freedom to set their own work schedules, an element highlighted by 73% of the participants during the discussions. Those with experience in other types of work stated that they vastly prefer fieldwork. Participant 8 explained: "Here in Chiloé, in the past, we had to ask for permission for our husbands to let us work the land; because the land belonged to our husbands... and that has now changed" (personal communication, April 26, 2024).

Sales have a positive influence on their economic autonomy, as only 13% primarily depend on income generated from other types of work, while 67% obtain their main source of income from fieldwork, and 20% consider both types of work as equally relevant. As an example, Participant 2 comments:

I am proud to be able to live off what I do... the combination of my crafts, my plants, and my garden allows me to survive. It's everything, because that's how I live; it's my daily sustenance to pay for my firewood, my electricity, my water. So, I am happy because, in the end, I have everything I need in order to earn my own money. (personal communication, February 7, 2024)

On average, 80% of their food comes from their own production, purchasing only those products they do not produce at home, such as sugar, salt, noodles, rice, dough, pasta, flour, and wheat, among others. Moreover, they prioritize buying from neighbors and acquaintances rather than going to the supermarket. The interactions during the visits to the warm Chilote homes, revealed the value they place on feeding themselves with what they produce at home, as evidenced in the comment from Participant 10: "What could be better than eating your own potatoes? You pick some shellfish, make a salad, if you want cabbage, you go get your cabbage, if you want lettuce, you go get your lettuce..." (personal communication, April 30, 2024).

This food autonomy also contributes to the food sovereignty and food security of their families and communities. Although these concepts are distinct, they are closely related (Figueroa et al., 2018). On one hand, the farmers and their families achieve food autonomy by possessing the knowledge and decision-making capacity regarding what foods to consume, how to produce them, and even how to sell them. This process enables them to preserve the essential elements of their culture, knowledge, and local Chiloe traditions, thereby reducing their dependence on the predominant food system.

This food autonomy enables the Chilote people to collectively maintain their food sovereignty, particularly through SIPAM-Chiloe. This international designation contributes to the protection of the Chiloe territory as a world heritage site, while promoting the development of food production and marketing policies tailored to the context of Chiloe. Within this framework, the families of the participants also enjoy food security, as their agroecological production sustainably ensures sufficient access to healthy food for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Chiloe has the potential to be an autonomous territory in terms of food, as its lands, forests, and ocean provide enough to meet the needs of its inhabitants. All participants stated that they had not experienced concerns about food scarcity in the past year. Their responses were emphatic on this matter, as reflected in the comment of participant 3: "Living by the sea? Nothing... no one dies of hunger" (personal communication, February 10, 2024).

Situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic have reinforced this food autonomy. During the initial months, when access to/from Chiloe through the Chacao Channel (the main access point) was blocked, the supply of food to the islands was reduced. However, this did not affect the food security of the families interviewed. In fact, 40% of them reported that their sales actually increased during the pandemic, as customers visited them to stock up on food and engage in occasional food exchanges. To ensure this food autonomy throughout the year, Chiloe families maintain the custom of storing food for the winter, including vegetables, legumes, and meats, in freezers designated for this purpose.

Agroecological production based on ancestral practices, along with its textiles, crafts, and agrotourism, form part of the cultural activities recognized by SIPAM-Chiloe. The reproduction of these practices contributes to maintaining a cultural autonomy unique to Chiloe. In this regard, Participant 10 notes that "by preserving this food and way of life, we are providing our children and grandchildren with a better quality of life in the future" (personal communication, April 30, 2024).

The role of women as producers, vendors, and guardians of Chiloe's traditions also strengthens their social autonomy. Their voices are heard and gain relevance as they organize into groups of female farmers. A clear example of this, is the group *La Ruta de Los Cisnes*, to which 33% of the participants belong. This group is composed of 10 farmers, of which 9 are women and only one of its members is male. They chose this name in reference to the dozens

of swans that visit the bay of Caulín Alto beach, in Ancud every winter. Each member offers different products such as vegetables, medicinal herbs, flowers, handmade liquors, garlic paste, jams, various crafts, and traditional dishes.

The voice of these women in decision-making, as representatives of farmers and local leaders, has favored the development and adjustment of communal and regional projects and programs. In the words of participant 2, these social networks "open up a world ahead and also provide opportunities for them (other women) and for me, to meet other people and enrich ourselves with the experiences of others" (personal communication, February 7, 2024).

The independence from their husbands has also allowed them to gradually free themselves from structural machismo, which is reflected in everyday situations. One example of this is that 73% own a car, and 33% regularly drive it to attend their meetings and sell their products at fairs and other events. No cases were observed where any of the women farmers use a motorcycle, most likely due to their age and the heavy rains and winds during the winter. Participant 8 clearly expressed this autonomy when stating:

I am freer now; I do what I want. If I have to go to a meeting, I just have to inform them that I'm going. I no longer have to ask for permission. I just let them know, 'I'm going here, I'm going there,' and I don't know what time I'll be back. These changes have been noticeable. (personal communication, April 26, 2024)

4. Conclusions

This research contributes to understanding how women's participation in short agroecological food supply chains (SAFSC) influences their autonomy. Based on the presented data, it can be concluded that the accumulation of tangible and intangible capital has a positive influence on the economic, labor, food, cultural, and social autonomy of women indigenous farmers certified under the SIPAM-Chiloé system.

It is important to highlight that female farmers in Chiloé are no longer perceived as mere wives, mothers, and grandmothers solely responsible for domestic tasks, nor are they subjects of discrimination. Instead, they are recognized within their communities as entrepreneurs leading significant projects. As producers and sellers of their harvests, they manage their lands autonomously, which allows them to fully own their production. These women are innovators who, proactively and freely, have diversified their sources of income. Many of them work in the field alongside their husbands, which contributes to their work being seen not only as help or assistance, but as the foundation of the economic income that sustains their households.

Their ancestral agricultural practices, combined with contemporary agroecological approaches, as well as the management of their lands, forests, animals, and the ocean, contribute to the Chiloé archipelago having an autonomous food system. This autonomy was evident during the pandemic, when none of the participating families experienced food shortages. Healthy and sufficient food for themselves and their families is paramount. To ensure this, they produce the majority of their food. Self-consumption is their priority, initially dedicating their harvests to this purpose and selling the surplus.

The socioeconomic, cultural, and political environment surrounding the Chiloé female farmers is a determining factor for their success. The initiatives of SIPAM-Chiloé, along with state support, are fundamental, as they contribute to increasing their autonomy through training, advisory services, subsidies, recognition, and the dissemination of their work. In particular, the training programs have played a key role in the development of their technical skills and

personal growth. This has enabled groups of female farmers to organize independently and gain access to the necessary support to carry out their activities.

In of Chiloé agroecology, the presence of women as key agents in the reproduction of ancestral culture is evident. This is reflected in their role in knowledge transmission, as well as in their position as Guardians of Native Seeds. The recognition they receive for their work is one of their main motivations. Aware that they possess an invaluable heritage for humanity, they feel both proud and responsible for protecting it.

In general terms, their autonomy is reflected in the daily exercise of decision-making power. Their participation enables them to play a role as agents of change, as they interact with other female farmers and create social networks without the need for authorization from anyone other than themselves. This process has fostered their growing independence from their husbands, who, for the most part, express pride in seeing their wives recognized within the community.

A limitation of this study lies in the fact that its findings are based exclusively on data obtained from female farmers certified under the SIPAM-Chiloé system, which reduces the potential for generalization. It is also important to highlight that in Chiloé, agroecology is not framed as a movement of explicit struggle, opposition, and resistance to the capitalist system. Rather, it is a daily practice that allows farmers to generate income and sustain their food system. In this regard, future studies could address other key aspects not considered in the present research, such as the role of men in agroecological labor, or explore other ethnic, technical, geographical, social, and cultural contexts.

This research is relevant because it employs a scientific approach that integrates the theoretical contributions of Amartya Sen, Pierre Bourdieu, and Bordenave, with the aim of expanding the understanding of the relationship between women's labor and autonomy. In this way, it highlights, based on empirical data, that the socioeconomic and cultural context is crucial for the success of these women farmers. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of including rural women in the local economy initiatives. The findings of this study are intended to serve as a foundation for future academic research with similar approaches, as well as for the design, implementation, and reformulation of programs and public policies aimed at improving the quality of life of indigenous women in rural areas.

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7. Endnotes

ⁱ Due to its local certification, the Chiloé GIAHS will be referred to as SIPAM-Chiloé in this document.

ⁱⁱ Updated data can be found at: <http://www.fao.org/giahs/around-the-world/en>

ⁱⁱⁱ Mariscar is a term used by the Chilotes to refer to walking along the shores of the beach and looking for seafood to take home and eat. This activity is more frequent in the summer.

^{iv} A term used by the inhabitants of Chiloé to refer to people who live outside the archipelago.

^v Chilote farmers were employed for rural labor, primarily for the care of sheep herding during long working hours in extreme cold conditions. As a result, they earned higher wages than those they could obtain in Chiloé, enabling them to send remittances to their families.

^{vi} “Minga” is the term used in Chiloé to refer to communal labor. It refers to the gathering of friends, neighbors, or family members who, in a spirit of solidarity, assist a family with fieldwork, primarily at the start of planting and harvesting. This practice substitutes paid labor.

^{vii} Fertilizer used to improve the soil, obtained from the decomposition of organic waste such as vegetable and fruit scraps, leaves, and animal manure, which they store, remove, and constantly ventilate. Many of them also incorporate red Californian worms (producing worm compost), as well as seaweed collected freely from nearby beaches.

^{viii} Fertilizer that improves the soil rapidly, obtained from organic waste mixed with elements such as wheat, sugar, yeast, milk, and leaves, which they store and let rest before preserving.

^{ix} In Chile, there are ten indigenous peoples. The Huilliche people are not yet officially recognized as one of them, as they are formally considered a subgroup of the Mapuche people, who inhabit central and southern Chile. However, they differ in culture, language, and geography.

^x Within the context of biodynamics, planting is based on the premise that celestial cycles determine the growth and quality of food. Plants growing below the ground are sown during the waning moon, and those growing above the ground during the waxing moon.

^{xi} A project managed by the Office of Agricultural Studies and Policies (ODEPA) of the Ministry of Agriculture and supported by the Gender Mainstreaming Fund of the Ministry of Women and Gender Equity

^{xii} In Mapudungun, it is written as 'kurantu' and means stony ground. It is the most traditional dish of Chiloé, commonly prepared under hot stones in a hole in the ground, consisting of seafood, potatoes, and other meats, accompanied by a broth derived from its own cooking.

^{xiii} A light meal typically consisting of coffee, tea, or mate, and some bread or a light snack.

^{xiv} 80% make jams made by themselves, and 67% weave.