

SIPAM como una alternativa para perpetuar los sistemas alimentarios. Experiencias de mujeres agricultoras que pertenecen a SIPAM/Chiloé *SIPAM as a Strategy to Sustain Local Food Systems: Insights from Women Farmers in Chiloé*

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GT5. Agricultura familiar e relações de gênero no meio rural

Resumen:

El régimen alimentario global ejerce una presión constante sobre pueblos originarios y comunidades tradicionales, para que adopten patrones de consumo más industrializados y masificados. Este artículo analiza la manera en que la iniciativa SIPAM, de la FAO; influye en el mantenimiento de los sistemas alimentarios tradicionales. Utilizando la teoría de los campos sociales, se examinaron las experiencias de agricultoras indígenas del archipiélago de Chiloé, en Chile. Se implementó una metodología etnográfica, combinando datos cuantitativos y cualitativos, obtenidos mediante observación estructurada participante y entrevistas semiestructuradas. Las iniciativas relacionadas al reconocimiento SIPAM y la certificación local SIPAM/Chiloé, ciertamente contribuyen a la protección del territorio local, así como de sus conocimientos y técnicas tradicionales de producción y consumo de alimentos. SIPAM también incrementa el orgullo, consciencia y reconocimiento del trabajo agroecológico femenino.

Palavras-chave: Pierre Bourdieu. Trabajo femenino. Agroecología. Agricultura alternativa. ONU.

Abstract

The global food regime exerts constant pressure on Indigenous peoples and traditional communities to adopt increasingly industrialized and massified consumption patterns. This article analyzes how the FAO's Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) initiative—SIPAM in Spanish—contributes to the preservation of traditional food systems. Drawing on the theory of social fields, the study examines the experiences of Indigenous women farmers from the Chiloé Archipelago in Chile. An ethnographic methodology was implemented, combining quantitative and qualitative data collected through structured participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Initiatives linked to SIPAM recognition and the local SIPAM/Chiloé certification clearly contribute to the protection of local territories, as well as to the preservation of traditional knowledge and food production and consumption practices. SIPAM also fosters pride, awareness, and recognition of women's agroecological labor.

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu. Women's Labor. Agroecology. Alternative Agriculture. United Nations.

1. Introduction

Modernity comes with it a transition toward new forms of eating, and Indigenous populations are no exception. These communities have experienced, as part of this trend, a reduction in the practice of their traditional customs, increased market dependency, and nutritionally deficient diets. Authors such as McMichael (2009) argue that global agriculture is subordinated to the rules established by the capitalist system. From this perspective, the food regime is structured through a global geopolitical framework that temporarily regulates the policies and dynamics of food production and consumption. This regime operates through commonly established mechanisms, in which various organizations, states, and countries negotiate how food production, distribution, trade, and consumption will be carried out on a global scale. Currently, this regime is the result of power relations that have upheld the capitalist empire, particularly through hegemonic dynamics among states, nations, and corporations

(Friedman, 2009; Otero, 2012). Authors such as De Schutter (2017) and Gliessman et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of the coexistence of more localized traditional agri-food structures within the global regime. These systems, shaped by the specific contexts of their territories, have the potential to provide adequate nourishment for their populations. Due to the wide range of economic, social, cultural, and nutritional benefits they offer, such local systems have been essential to the well-being of various Indigenous peoples.

In an effort to support the protection of these traditional food systems, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) established the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) initiative—known as SIPAM in Spanish. This recognition is granted to agricultural systems that serve as alternatives to conventional agriculture, protecting and respecting the cultures, environments, and biodiversity of their respective territories. These systems rely on traditional knowledge, practices, and locally rooted technologies to sustain livelihoods and ensure food security. They have proven to be essential for sustainable development, particularly in rural areas, benefiting both current and future generations. Their core activities include agriculture, forestry, aquaculture, tourism, fishing, as well as food processing and production (FAO, 2016). The main goal of the GIAHS/SIPAM initiative is to “identify, support and safeguard agricultural systems that have contributed to our world with landscapes, biodiversity, knowledge and culture” (FAO, 2016, p. 1).

This article aims to analyze how the GIAHS initiative—Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems—of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) influences the maintenance and protection of traditional food systems, based on the experiences and life histories of women farmers from the Chiloé Archipelago in Chile. This study draws upon the theoretical contributions of key authors in the fields of agroecology and traditional food systems. Additionally, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social fields (2003, 2007) was employed to provide a deep relational explanation of the practices that exist within the geopolitical area under study. An ethnographic methodology was chosen to capture the complexity of social phenomena as they occur in their everyday contexts and to understand the lived realities of the participants. As part of the cultural immersion, the researcher resided in Chile and Chiloé from November 2023 to May 2024. A non-experimental, cross-sectional approach was adopted to analyze variables at a specific point in time. The sample consisted of 15 non-probabilistically selected women farmers, using intentional and self-selected sampling. Most of the participants are Indigenous women who hold the SIPAM/Chiloé certification and live and work in rural areas across various municipalities of Chiloé. Primary data were collected through structured participant and non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The researcher accompanied various farmers in their daily routines, taking part in agricultural work and participating in diverse meetings. Supplementary tools included field notes, archival newspaper articles, audio recordings, and photographs.

2. Results and Discussion

The women who participated in this study are, on average, married and 53 years old, and mothers of two children. Sixty percent of them continue the agricultural traditions of their ancestors, working on land—mostly inherited—with plot sizes ranging from one to sixty hectares. The majority identify as Indigenous.

It became evident that the Chiloé Archipelago is a territory deeply shaped by its ancestral heritage. Comprising more than forty islands, the Chilote people maintain a close relationship with their environment, where both land and sea play a central role—elements reflected in their rich mythology and agricultural practices. This territory is physically and culturally distinct from mainland Chile (whose inhabitants are referred to by locals as *los del continente*). The islands are home to numerous Indigenous communities that preserve their

customs, culture, language, traditional clothing, and dietary habits, all while maintaining a strong commitment to environmental stewardship and community health.

These and many other factors contribute to a form of agriculture that differs markedly from that practiced in the rest of Chile and Latin America. Today, Chile hosts one of the GIAHS sites recognized as a reference in this field: Chiloé Agriculture. In 2011, Chile was among the first group of countries to receive the FAO's GIAHS designation. Since its inception, the Center for Education and Technology (CET) and the Agricultural Development Institute (INDAP) of the Los Lagos Region have played a fundamental role.

As one of the first GIAHS sites in the world, both the FAO and the Chilean government have made significant progress in transforming this recognition into tangible benefits for the agriculture and economy of the Chilote families involved. This has been achieved in large part through the SIPAM/Chiloé label and trademark (Chile, 2013), which has been registered as a territorial brand protected by the Chilean Ministry of Agriculture through the National Institute of Industrial Property (INAPI). For each farmer in Chiloé to obtain this label, they must undergo a certification process and renew it periodically. In general terms, this certification/label can be granted to products and services that meet sustainability standards, are produced in ways that respect biodiversity, and reflect local cultural practices. As a result, the participants have diversified their sources of income, engaging in agricultural activities as well as hospitality services, handicrafts, restaurants, tourism, and more.

In Chiloé, we are all SIPAM was a common phrase heard during conversations with the Chilote women farmers. This expression illustrates how the people of Chiloé recognize and take pride in their agricultural heritage. All participants produce their food using agroecological methods. They also emphasized practices such as recycling—evident in all households—reforestation with native species, soil and river conservation, and respect for animals, forests, seas, and land. Additionally, they reported limited use of industrial machinery. In several conversations, participants recalled how traditional food production practices in Chiloé had been gradually disappearing. This was primarily due to the introduction of chemical fertilizers, which were provided to farmers with the promise of increasing and accelerating their yields. Over time, the use of these inputs intensified, eventually causing damage to the fields and lands of many farmers—something they themselves acknowledge. In this regard, Participant 6 noted:

I remember that when I was a child, we used to fertilize with sea wool and the manure collected from animals... but suddenly there was a shift when they started telling our parents, 'No, there's a better fertilizer than that one,' and then these chemical products were introduced for planting... That's when the wave of agroecology came to the rescue, especially through CET in Chonchi and SIPAM. They reminded us that, yes, our methods were much better than lab-created fertilizers. We began to value these traditions again, the customs we used to follow. (personal communication, April 10, 2024)

For the Chilote people, the importance of preserving their own food system is clear. As expressed by Participant 4 when reflecting on the influence of SIPAM: "By preserving this way of eating and living, we are giving our children and grandchildren a better quality of life for the future" (personal communication, April 10, 2024).

3. Conclusions

Chiloé possesses a distinctive food system, deeply influenced by Indigenous ancestry and local cosmovision. The theory of social fields made it possible to identify that, for the Huilliche people, preserving their food system is a central priority. In addition to being producers and sellers, women play a fundamental role in caring for their families, the environment, and the preservation of ancestral heritage.

In this context, the FAO's GIAHS initiative, along with local efforts under SIPAM/Chiloé, is essential in fostering greater recognition and appreciation of the work carried out by farming families, particularly rural Indigenous women. These initiatives have

contributed to increased financial support from the state, enabling the implementation of projects such as greenhouses, vegetable gardens, irrigation systems, animal protection, and access to new markets, among others. Their influence has also been positive in terms of the transmission of ancestral and Indigenous knowledge, as well as in the safeguarding and exchange of native seeds—key to preserving both the local food system and biodiversity. A clear example of this is the continued existence of a wide variety of native potatoes. The territory of Chiloé is also protected through this international recognition. In the case of Chiloé, GIAHS/SIPAM has been empirically demonstrated to be an effective alternative for reclaiming local culture, as well as traditional food production knowledge and techniques. This, in turn, fosters a strong sense of pride and responsibility for preserving their cultural heritage.

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