

Strengthening Communication and Participation among Women Smallholder Farmers: A Participatory Research Project in Yumbel, Chile

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Abstract: This article examines the need to improve communication between women smallholder farmers and local authorities in Chile, a problem stemming from ineffective communication channels that restrict access to essential programs and development resources. In this article, “women smallholder farmers” refers to producers engaged in family-based smallholder agriculture, characterised by limited land size, local-scale production, and partial dependence on state support programmes provided by INDAP. The study also highlights their limited participation in local institutional decision-making spaces related to agricultural policies that directly affect their lives. Using a participatory research methodology, the women became co-creators of knowledge, actively engaging in problem identification and solution building.

The process not only strengthened communication with institutions but also promoted women’s involvement in concrete decision-making spaces, such as local community councils and development committees, and fostered the emergence of community leadership roles linked to territorial representation. The findings show how participatory methodologies can contribute to more inclusive agricultural policies while addressing epistemic injustices that have historically silenced rural women. This article contributes to the international literature on participatory research by demonstrating how this approach can enhance rural women’s agency in local policy-making processes related to agricultural development. The case of Yumbel, Chile, provides insights that may inform similar initiatives in other rural contexts of the Global South.

Keywords: Participatory Research, Women Farmers, Communication, Decision-Making, Rural Development

Fortalecimiento de la comunicación y la participación entre mujeres agricultoras de pequeña escala: un proyecto de investigación participativa en Yumbel, Chile

Resumen: Este artículo analiza la necesidad de mejorar la comunicación entre las mujeres pequeñas agricultoras y las autoridades locales en Chile, un problema derivado por canales de comunicación ineficaces que restringen su acceso a programas y recursos esenciales para su desarrollo. En este artículo, „mujeres pequeñas agricultoras“ se refiere a productoras que practican la agricultura familiar a pequeña escala, caracterizada por una superficie de tierra limitada, producción de alcance local y dependencia parcial de programas de apoyo estatal impartidos por el INDAP. El estudio también evidencia su baja participación en los espacios institucionales locales de toma de decisiones relacionados con políticas agrícolas que afectan directamente sus vidas. Mediante una metodología de investigación participativa, las agricultoras se transformaron en cocreadoras del conocimiento, participando activamente en la

identificación de problemas y la construcción de soluciones. Este proceso no solo fortaleció la comunicación con las instituciones, sino que también promovió la participación de las mujeres en espacios concretos de toma de decisiones, como los consejos comunitarios locales y los comités de desarrollo, y favoreció la emergencia de liderazgos comunitarios vinculados a la representación territorial. Los resultados muestran cómo las metodologías participativas pueden contribuir a políticas agrícolas más inclusivas y, al mismo tiempo, afrontar las injusticias epistémicas que históricamente han silenciado a las mujeres rurales. Este artículo aporta a la literatura internacional sobre investigación participativa al mostrar cómo este enfoque puede potenciar la agencia de las mujeres rurales en los procesos de formulación de políticas agrícolas locales. El caso de Yumbel, Chile, ofrece aprendizajes que pueden orientar iniciativas similares en otros contextos rurales del Sur Global.

Palabras clave: Investigación Participativa, Mujeres Agricultoras, Comunicación, Toma de decisiones, Desarrollo Rural

1. Introduction

In Chile, women engaged in family-based smallholder agriculture play a crucial role in the development of agriculture, a key sector for the rural economy and the country's food security. Despite their fundamental contribution, these women continue to face significant barriers that limit their access to resources and their participation in decision-making. One of the main difficulties is the lack of effective communication between women smallholder farmers and local and central policymakers, which prevents their needs and priorities from being fully understood and addressed in agricultural policies.

Although quantitative data on women's agricultural participation in Chile remains fragmented and uneven across official sources, available statistics indicate clear gendered disparities in the sector. The agricultural sector employs approximately 5% of the national labour force, of which around 24% are women, many of whom are in informal or precarious positions (CropLife Latin America, 2024). Regional data also shows that women hold over 25% of agricultural holdings in countries such as Chile, Ecuador and Panama (Resilience.org, 2023). At the same time, previous census data from Chile highlights persistent structural barriers in access to employment and productive resources in rural areas (INE, 2008). These gaps and disparities justify the focus of this study on women farmers as a group whose marginalisation in agricultural policy is both understudied and insufficiently addressed.

Furthermore, the limited participation of women in decision-making spaces related to family-based smallholder agriculture contributes to public policies lacking an adequate gender perspective. Women farmers are marginalised in policy formulation, which perpetuates their invisibility and the structural inequalities they face. These two problems—lack of communication and exclusion from local decision-making—impede the development of women farmers, thereby undermining the progress of their communities. While men also participate in smallholder agriculture, women often carry responsibility for household food security, informal labour, and community organisation, yet remain underrepresented in leadership and institutional spaces. Their marginalisation, therefore, has a disproportionate impact on community development, making their inclusion critical to achieving structural change.