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The Struggle for Communal Lands in the Colombian Caribbean: The Gendered Labor of Peasant Women and Children during the Early Years of Agrarian Reform

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Abstract

The Colombian Caribbean region has one of the most unequal agrarian structures in Latin America, shaped by the rise of large cattle estates and agricultural booms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Agrarian Reform Law of 1961 provided an opportunity to challenge this regime of land accumulation. This article explores the roles of peasant women and children in both sustaining productive and reproductive labor within the Caribbean large estate and during the peasant mobilization in the 1960s, the early years of agrarian reform. It argues that when peasants mobilized to occupy communal lands in the agrarian reform context, women and children actively transformed the reproductive labor they used to perform on the estates into collective efforts that sustained peasant mobilization by protecting Caribbean peasant communities from precarity and defending the commons as the possibility to sustain life and care outside of the logic of large estate expansion.

Keywords: Agrarian Reform, Peasant Mobilization, Productive and Reproductive Labor, Gender, Colombian Caribbean.

La lucha por las tierras comunales en el Caribe colombiano: género y trabajo en la movilización campesina durante los primeros años de la reforma agraria

Resumen

El Caribe colombiano tiene una de las estructuras agrarias más desiguales de América Latina, derivada de los latifundios ganaderos y diferentes booms agrícolas de finales del siglo XIX y principios del XX. La Ley de Reforma Agraria de 1961 permitió desafiar este régimen de acumulación de tierras. Este artículo explora el papel de las mujeres y las infancias en el sostenimiento del trabajo productivo y reproductivo dentro de los latifundios del Caribe y durante la movilización campesina de la década de 1960. El artículo sostiene que, en la movilización campesina por la reforma agraria, las mujeres e infancias transformaron el trabajo reproductivo que solían realizar en los latifundios en esfuerzos colectivos que sostuvieron la movilización campesina, protegiendo a las comunidades campesinas del Caribe de la precariedad y defendiendo los bienes comunes como la posibilidad de sostener la vida y el cuidado por fuera de la lógica de la expansión latifundista.

Palabras clave: reforma agraria, movilización campesina, trabajo productivo y reproductivo, género, Caribe colombiano.

Introduction

In 1961, in the aftermath of the bipartisan civil war known as “La Violencia” of the 1950s, President Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958-1962) enacted the Agrarian Social Reform Law in Colombia. Framed as a project of national rehabilitation, from the government’s perspective, the reform sought to address the long-standing and ongoing “land question,” which had fueled rural unrest across the nation. The reform was also part of the United States’ backed Alliance for Progress, which aimed to improve rural workers’ access to land and development to curb revolutionary movements in Colombia amid the Cold War context. For peasants, agrarian reform promised a rare and unique opportunity to challenge entrenched regimes of land accumulation. In the Colombian Caribbean, cattle ranching and diverse agricultural booms led to the expansion of large estates and the extensive appropriation of public lands, encroaching peasants’ livelihoods and restricting their access to land and essential resources. As a result, Caribbean peasants viewed agrarian reform as an opportunity to access land and promote land redistribution in the region.

Scholarship on the agrarian regimes in the Colombian Caribbean has illuminated how large estates expanded through agricultural booms, cattle ranching, and landowners’ appropriation of communal and public lands (Colmenares Guerra, 2024; Guerra, 2020; LeGrand, 1988; Reyes Posada, 1978). Additional research has underscored how power is a crucial category to understand the dynamics of land grabbing and enclosure that have impacted peasant communities in the Caribbean. These studies show how land accumulation enabled elites to consolidate political and economic power and how landless peasants were compelled to work on the estates or seek new lands to clear, which landowners later appropriated (Colmenares Guerra, 2024; Guerra, 2020; Lozano, 2010; Meertens, 2000). Revisionist perspectives have complicated the notion of Caribbean landowners’ absolute control over land and labor in the region, questioning binary interpretations of Caribbean agrarian histories that depict a conflict between poor landless peasants and all-powerful landowners (Ocampo, 2007; Posada Carbó, 1998; Van Ausdal, 2009, 2022). Meanwhile, scholarship on agrarian reform in the Caribbean Colombia has identified this period as the peak of the peasant movement in the region. It highlights the mobilization capacity and strength of peasants, as well as the lasting impacts of this era on today’s peasant movement (De la Rosa Carriazo, 2024; Gutiérrez Sanín et al., 2023; Machuca Pérez, 2023; Zamosc, 1986). In particular, researchers have focused on the creation and mobilization strategies employed by the National Association of Peasant Users (Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos, ANUC) since its establishment in 1967.

The scholarship on large estates in the Caribbean, along with studies on agrarian reform and peasant mobilization, often overlooks gender as an important analytical category for understanding both the large estates and the efforts to challenge them. Additionally, research on the agrarian reform of the 1960s has primarily focused on the years of the ANUC, paying less attention to the mobilization practices during the early years of agrarian reform. This article explores the formation and maintenance of large estates in the Caribbean, as well as the early

years of mobilization for agrarian reform, focusing on the experiences of peasant women and children.

Research in gender history and feminist political ecology has highlighted how peasant women and children supported agrarian economies through both productive and reproductive labor in the Colombian Caribbean (Berman-Arévalo, 2021; Berman-Arévalo & Ojeda, 2020; Meertens, 2000; Ojeda, 2021). Throughout the 20th century, Caribbean peasant women and children managed the majority of domestic activities within their families and communities. They cooked for their extended families as well as for the estate workers, transported water, tended to domestic animals, washed clothes, cleaned houses, and cared for subsistence crops. In addition to these responsibilities, women and children actively engaged in activities aimed at supplying local and external markets. They grew and processed tobacco, sold food, goods, and crafts, and cleaned nearby houses. This daily labor was essential for the sustenance of families and the day-to-day operations of large estates. Without it, the accumulation of capital and the expansion of large estates would not have been possible (Berman-Arévalo & Ojeda, 2020; Stolcke, 1995).

Building on this scholarship, this article argues that women and children actively transformed the caregiving and reproductive work they traditionally performed for their families and communities on the estates into collective efforts that sustained and protected Caribbean peasant mobilization for agrarian reform. In the early years of agrarian reform, peasants occupied large estates to advocate for land redistribution. During these land occupations, women and children played vital roles by cooking for their fellow peasants, growing subsistence crops, washing clothes, collecting water, organizing community meals, and ensuring the wellbeing of the community when the police arrived to dismantle the land occupations. In this context, the reproductive labor performed by women and children served a dual purpose, highlighting a paradox. On one hand, it helped sustain both labor and life on the large estate, enabling the accumulation of capital and land. On the other hand, it also supported peasant mobilization aimed at resisting the large estate regime during the early years of agrarian reform. While research on gender in the agrarian systems of the Caribbean has primarily focused on the role of reproductive labor in facilitating capital accumulation, it has not sufficiently examined how this labor influenced and shaped mobilization efforts during the agrarian reform years.¹ By foregrounding the domestic and the reproductive in struggles for agrarian reform, this study underscores the crucial role of peasant women and children in sustaining and making possible Caribbean peasant mobilization for agrarian reform.

This article is based on three types of primary sources. First, it utilizes seven transcripts of interviews conducted by Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda during the 1970s.² These

¹ Andrea Cely Forero's work (2022) significantly contributes to characterizing the reproductive labor roles of peasant women and children in supporting mobilization efforts from a long-term national perspective in Colombia.

² Orlando Fals Borda (1925-2008) was a Colombian sociologist born in Barranquilla, a city in the Colombian Caribbean. He is regarded as the "father of sociology" in Colombia. Fals Borda is particularly known for developing a model of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which "sought to erase the subject-object distinction that characterized the social science of the period by resignifying research as a dialogue between equals, recognizing that people's knowledge had as much to contribute analytically as did scientific inquiry" (Rappaport, 2020, p. 8). In

interviews include four with peasant men and three with peasant women from the Córdoba region in the Colombian Caribbean. They focus on the daily lives of peasants who worked on cattle ranching estates from the early 20th century until the 1970s. Second, the article includes two oral histories collected in 2022 and 2023 from Delfina and Gustavo, a couple of peasant activists from the Sucre region in the Colombian Caribbean. They spent their childhoods working on various estates and became involved in the movement advocating for agrarian reform in the 1960s. Together, these testimonies reveal how women and children's reproductive labor shaped both the reproduction of the large estate regime and the practices of peasant resistance in the early agrarian reform years. Finally, the article utilizes press clippings from *Diario El Caribe*, a local newspaper in the Colombian Caribbean region, which reported on land disputes in the area. This approach helps trace the common struggles for land during the early years of agrarian reform in the region and highlights the involvement of peasant women and children in these mobilizations as reported by the press³.

The expansion of the large estate and the productive and reproductive labor of women and children

By the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, the agricultural landscape of the Colombian Caribbean underwent a significant transformation. Initially, during the 19th century, agriculture primarily occurred on small plots that were hindered by poor access roads, irregular and informal land titling process, and a lack of infrastructure. In this context, landowners had limited control over a labor force that was dispersed across the territory (Posada Carbó, 1998, p. 74). By the late 19th century, this landscape evolved as the cattle-ranching industry consolidated (Sibaja Madera, 2023), and various agribusiness products such as rice, tobacco, banana, sugar cane, and cotton became established in the region. According to Adriano Guerra (2020), by 1930, “of the eight million heads of cattle that existed in the country, four million were concentrated on the Atlantic Coast. Three million were in the department of Bolívar, and one million were in the department of Magdalena” (pp. 99–100). Similarly, by 1960, the plains in the Caribbean coast and Antioquia region comprised more than half of the country's livestock (Van Ausdal, 2009, p. 135). With these new dynamics, large estates expanded, and landowners increasingly acquired lands to grow their industries (LeGrand, 1988, p. 79; Reyes Posada, 1978, p. 75).

From the peasants' perspective, the growing expansion of large estates made it increasingly difficult for them to access land, water, roads, and essential resources for sustaining life on a daily basis (Lozano, 2010). As landowners took over productive areas near market routes

the 1970s, during the implementation of agrarian reform, Fals Borda, along with a team of researchers and peasant activists from the National Association of Peasant Users (Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos, ANUC), founded the *Fundación Caribe*. This research-political collective aimed to “unearth the forgotten histories of popular struggles in order to resignify them as organizing tools for social movements” (Rappaport, 2020, p. 9), particularly to support agrarian reform efforts in the Colombian Caribbean. This paper draws on the archival materials collected by the *Fundación Caribe* throughout its years of PAR research in the region, which are now housed in the Centro de Documentación Regional Orlando Fals Borda in Montería, Colombia.

³ All citations of primary sources in this paper have been translated from Spanish to English by the author.

and water sources, peasants were forced to clear land on the outskirts of large estates to grow subsistence crops. Once they had cleared the land, landowners would buy the improvements (*mejoras*) made by the peasants and incorporate those plots into their estates. As a result, peasants were either expelled and forced to seek new areas to clear or were offered low-paying jobs as laborers on the estates (Colmenares Guerra, 2024, p. 50; Meertens, 2020; Reyes Posada, 1978). In this context, peasants did not own land and remained as settlers (*colonos*) seeking plots to clear and cultivate in an increasingly pressured agricultural frontier.

Since the 1980s, gender scholars have called for the inclusion of a gender perspective in the analysis of the dynamics surrounding large estate expansion and capital accumulation in rural areas across the globe and in Latin America and the Caribbean (Deere, 1995; Meillassoux, 1977; Stolcke, 1995). This body of research stresses that, to ensure the ongoing reproduction of life within the estates and prevent the labor force from diminishing, caretaking activities such as cooking, cleaning, and providing clothing and shelter, must be maintained consistently over time, without interruption (Deere, 1995; Stolcke, 1995). This daily reproduction of life extends beyond biological needs; it also involves the socialization of the next generation of workers through child-rearing and emotional education (Deere, 1995, p. 63). In the rural areas of Latin America and the Caribbean, peasant women and children have taken on the majority of the reproductive labor needed to sustain their families and communities, while also being actively engaged in productive labor, both in the fields and in nearby factories. The dual role of peasant women and children in both productive and reproductive tasks has been essential for wealth production and accumulation in the countryside (Stolcke, 1995, p. 66); it has ensured the reproduction of the labor force and the daily continuation of the estates' operations.

In the case of the Colombian Caribbean, Fals Borda's interviews with peasant men and women working on cattle ranching estates show that, in addition to ranching, landowners also cultivated and traded other products, such as tobacco, to increase their income. Furthermore, the operation of these estates relied on the cultivation of a variety of provisioning crops to feed both workers and local markets. Most of these activities were managed by peasant women.

An interview with a peasant man who worked on a cattle ranch estate in San Pedro, Sucre, revealed that the landowner leased plots of land to peasants in exchange for their work in growing and selling tobacco and livestock production. When discussing the division of labor on the estate, he noted that women were generally excluded from livestock-related activities; instead, they were involved in the tobacco industry and kitchen work. He stated, "women were sought after, as they are now, for cooking and tobacco. Livestock farming was very difficult for women."⁴ In a similar account, another peasant who worked on José María Pizarro's cattle ranch in Ovejas, Sucre, explained that in addition to livestock tasks, Pizarro also traded tobacco with Germany. Peasant women from various regions along the Caribbean coast would travel to Pizarro's estate to process the tobacco in exchange for a salary. These testimonies reveal that peasant women played an active role in the tobacco production, which supported the overall

⁴ Centro de Documentación Regional Orlando Fals Borda-Montería (hereafter CDROFB). Banco de la República. *Estudio de la mujer en el sector rural*. Caja 1. Carpeta 4, sf.

revenues of the cattle ranching estates, while also meeting the domestic needs of their families and the people living and working on those estates.

Another example of the dual role of Caribbean peasant women as both producers and reproducers in ranching estates can be seen in the testimony of a peasant woman from Ovejas, Sucre. In her account, she described the domestic aspects of her work along with her contributions to the tobacco industry as part of a single chain of labor that occurred within the same space: the home. According to her testimony,

women who worked in the tobacco industry as wage earners were typically responsible for tasks such as sorting, smoothing, and folding tobacco leaves. These skills were often acquired at an early age from their mothers at home. Girls usually sit with their mothers and observe their work until they learn how to differentiate between the quality of tobacco, its thickness, the length of the leaf, and how to handle the needle and introduce it through the middle of the leaf vein from the lower part of the leaf. These are skills that girls started learning and performing from the age of 7 or 8.⁵

In this interview, the domestic space plays a vital role in teaching peasant women and children the necessary skills and knowledge to eventually work as wage earners in the tobacco industry. Moreover, this same domestic setting is where women and children sustained the lives of their families by providing food, shelter, clothing, and care. In the interviewee's description of her daily routine as a tobacco worker, she described Fals Borda how she

gets up between 4 and 5 am to wash clothes -if she does not do it daily, she does it on Sundays-. She makes breakfast so that at 6:30 am, the children, who have already been bathed and dressed by her, are either left at home or go to school or daycare. She works from 7:30 am to 12 noon and then arrives home to deliver lunch, which has been prepared by the daughters or sons in case there are no daughters. She returns to work from 1 pm to 5 pm. When she comes back home, she cooks dinner for her partner and children, tidies up the house, sweeps, irons, mends, and goes to bed at 9 pm.⁶

The description of this daily routine reveals the crucial role of the domestic space in making both reproduction and production possible. The household setting provided girls with the necessary skills to work in the tobacco industry, allowing them to eventually become wage earners and laborers. It also served as a crucial space where women and children sustained daily life by guaranteeing the provision of food, shelter, clothing, and care to their family members. This labor ensured peasants' capacity to go to work and meet their daily basic needs.

⁵ CDROFB (Montería). Banco de la República. *Estudio de la mujer en el sector rural*. Caja 1. Carpeta 4, sf.

⁶ CDROFB (Montería). Banco de la República. *Estudio de la mujer en el sector rural*. Caja 1. Carpeta 4, sf.

In her oral history, Delfina recalled her childhood spent working in the livestock and cotton industries in Sucre, a cattle ranching region near Córdoba, which is where Fals Borda's interviewees are from. During this time, she was responsible for processing tobacco and picking cotton. Her testimony shares similarities with those of Fals Borda's interviews in several ways. Firstly, she learned the skills related to tobacco processing from her mother at home. When she was a little girl, her father left her and her mother, which caused financial stress in her home. According to Delfina, she began working alongside her mother “because she was left alone, without my father, so the three of us, my mother, my sister and I, worked to support the family.”⁷ She also combined her work in the tobacco industry with a job as a domestic servant in family households: “I first worked in family homes and then I worked in the tobacco companies, smoothing tobacco, peeling tobacco. My mother bought tobacco and folded it and sold it, and that's how we lived.”⁸

Later, when her mother remarried, Delfina and her stepbrother accompanied their stepfather to pick cotton. They would wake up at 3 a.m., prepare breakfast, and pack food for the day before heading to a nearby estate to pick cotton. During the day, they typically harvested around 1 arroba (11.5 kilograms) for which they were paid 5 pesos. While picking cotton, Delfina's mother processed tobacco on a nearby estate. Similar to the interviews conducted by Fals Borda, Delfina's oral history reveals that both the children and the parents contributed to supporting the family. In addition to working on estates and in family households, Delfina recalled how she and her siblings helped grow subsistence crops, cooked meals, and transported water to meet the family's daily reproductive needs. In reflecting on her childhood, Delfina acknowledges that she cannot remember a time in her life when she was not working.

The interviews conducted by sociologist Orlando Fals Borda with peasants from the regions of Córdoba and Sucre, along with the oral history of Delfina, reveal two essential aspects of the labor performed by peasant women and children in the Colombian Caribbean. First, in the region, these social actors carried the majority of the tasks necessary to sustain and reproduce life within their families and in the estates. As described by a peasant man interviewed by Fals Borda, men in the Caribbean “always seeks a companion when he is alone, as in addition to being a partner, a woman represents an economic contribution by taking care of the home - cooking, doing laundry, taking care of the children, and so on.”⁹ Second, in addition to serving as caretakers and attending to the needs of their relatives and the estate's workers, Caribbean peasant women and children also participated actively in the production processes of the estates and contributed to generating income for landowners. In fact, this dual role as both reproducers and producers mingled into their daily routines to the point that they did not perceive reproductive and productive activities as separate realms. Instead, they described them as interconnected parts of a single chain of labor that sustained the life and work of families and estates.

⁷ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

⁸ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

⁹ CDROFB (Montería). Banco de la República. *Estudio de la mujer en el sector rural*. Caja 1. Carpeta 4, sf.

As argued by Deere and León (1986), these labor routines of peasant women and children were not power-neutral or egalitarian. On the contrary, women and children carried a heavier workload because they were responsible for most of the reproductive activities while also engaging in productive tasks, in contrast to peasant men who participated less in these reproductive efforts. Additionally, the lack of public services such as drinking water, electricity, and sewage in some rural areas made domestic duties more time-consuming and demanding for peasant women and children (p. 14).

For instance, both oral histories of Delfina and her husband, Gustavo, highlighted the additional efforts they had to make to access drinking water for their families. Gustavo, who also has worked on estates across Sucre and Córdoba since he was a young boy, recalled how he “has always worked the land.”¹⁰ He explained that one of the responsibilities was to plow and cultivate the land: “We chopped down and burned the brush to make way for planting herbs and crops. I remember that we planted cassava, yams, sesame, corn, beans, and watermelon. Everything we could grow for our daily sustenance.”¹¹ He also recalled how, in addition to working the land and growing crops, he would take baths in a stream near his house since they did not have access to water in their hut. He accompanied his father during the workday, and while bathing in the stream, they would collect water in a pot for his mother to use later in household chores. In this case, similar to what has been described in the oral history of Delfina and the testimonies gathered by Fals Borda, children and peasant women never stopped working. They sustained, on a daily basis, both production processes on the estates and the daily reproductive needs of their families.

In the Colombian Caribbean, gender inequalities and divisions of labor were also shaped by the trajectories of land accumulation and by the subsequent enclosures produced by the expansion of large estates during the 20th century. As large estates for cattle ranching, cotton, and banana production increasingly took control of labor and land in the region, access to essential resources for daily living became scarcer and more dependent on the terms set by landowners. A 90-year-old peasant men who worked on the cattle ranching estate of José María Pizarro in Ovejas, Sucre, noted that the Arrieta, Navarro, González, and García families were the “blancos” [whites] who had amassed significant land holdings in Sucre during the first half of the 20th century. According to this account, “they had a lot of land... they were immense balloons made up of farms that were bought or seized for loans that peasants could not pay.”¹² As the large estate grew, peasants were required to work for the landowner to obtain the necessary resources to meet their daily needs or to migrate in search of opportunities to colonize new lands at the outskirts of the estate.

The interviewee mentioned that in the past, landowners in San Pedro used to rent out small plots of land as well as provide money or food to peasant families in exchange for their labor or payment. In case the peasants were unable to pay the lease, “landowners would charge interest. If the peasants were still unable to pay their debts the following year, the landowners

¹⁰ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Gustavo Causado, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

¹¹ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Gustavo Causado, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

¹² CDROFB (Montería). Banco de la República. *Estudio de la mujer en el sector rural*. Caja 1. Carpeta 4, sf.

may then take away the plots of land, as well as the domestic animals and cows that belonged to the peasants.”¹³ The interviewee also pointed out that “most of the crops cultivated on the estate were for trade and not for subsistence,”¹⁴ highlighting how the expansion of large estates and agribusiness limited access for peasant women and children to essential resources needed to produce food and meet their families’ immediate needs.

In another interview from Fals Borda’s repository, an 81-year-old peasant man stated that the industrial cultivation of cotton made it impossible for peasants to keep domestic animals.¹⁵ He explained that the chemicals used in cotton production contaminated nearby water sources, causing animals that drink the water to die. The interviewee also mentioned that children became sick due to the close contact with the contaminated water. Peasant women and children, who had been responsible for the reproductive labor, have had extensive interaction with the tools, resources, knowledge, and practices essential for daily sustenance and livelihoods. This testimony illustrates how their role as caregivers has positioned them at the forefront of the diseases that arose from the continuous expansion of agribusiness and large estates in the region.

The oral histories of Delfina and Gustavo highlighted how the expansion of cattle ranching estates across Sucre during the 1950s and 1960s restricted peasant communities’ access to food and water sources. Gustavo argued that “the land here was owned by the rich, we had no land to work, and the rich had the land around the town, and they stayed with the police on mules, on horses, surrounding all the farms so that you could not enter their farm. So here we suffered a lot, we had many needs... at that time the children cried from hunger.”¹⁶ According to Gustavo and Delfina, as more land was acquired by landowners, peasant families struggled to cultivate their subsistence crops and obtain the necessary resources for daily survival. Gustavo recalled how, when he was a young boy, landowners hired police officers to guard their land. This kept peasant families from accessing water. In response, peasant men would keep watch for moments when the police relaxed their vigilance, allowing peasant women to enter the land with pots on their heads to collect as much water as they could without being noticed by the landowners or estate officers. Gustavo argued that peasant women typically made two or three trips a day to collect water for their household chores. The landowner had access to wells and had taken land near streams. While the estate used these water sources for the livestock, the peasants living on the outskirts of the estate suffered from water scarcity.

Delfina and Gustavo argued that the landscape of scarcity and enclosure compelled Caribbean peasants to occupy the estates. This strategy was commonly employed by peasants in the region to assert their claims to land and advocate for land redistribution during the early years of agrarian reform implementation. In Gustavo’s words, “during those times, we did not have land, and we had to provide for our children. They cried because they were starving, that’s why we invaded the land.”¹⁷ The next section will examine how the reproductive needs acted as

¹³ CDROFB (Montería). Banco de la República. *Estudio de la mujer en el sector rural*. Caja 1. Carpeta 4, sf.

¹⁴ CDROFB (Montería). Banco de la República. *Estudio de la mujer en el sector rural*. Caja 1. Carpeta 4, sf.

¹⁵ CDROFB (Montería). Banco de la República. *Estudio de la mujer en el sector rural*. Caja 1. Carpeta 4, sf.

¹⁶ (March 2, 2023). Interview with Gustavo Causado, peasant leader from Sucre. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

¹⁷ (March 2, 2023). Interview with Gustavo Causado, peasant leader from Sucre. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

both a catalyst for peasants occupying landowners' properties and a crucial condition of possibility for the agrarian reform struggle. In the movement for agrarian reform, peasant women and children sustained the lives and wellbeing of peasant activists, making agrarian mobilization possible.

The struggle for communal lands and playones from the viewpoints of peasant women and children

Research on agrarian reform in the Colombian Caribbean region indicates that peasant mobilization was common by the time the Agrarian Reform Law was enacted in 1961 (Meertens, 2000; Rivera Cusicanqui, 1982). During the 20th century, Caribbean peasants developed strategies to resist landowners' practices of encroaching on land and resources while also demanding basic services such as water, roads, hospitals, schools, and dignified working conditions from state authorities. Particularly, scholars emphasize the significant role of peasant women in the agrarian struggles of the Caribbean during the 1920s and 1930s. Notable Afro-descendant figures, such as Juana Julia Guzmán and Felicita Campos, took the lead in land occupations and rural protests during these early twentieth-century decades (Meertens, 2020, pp. 56–57; Patiño Niño, 2025).

This tradition of women's mobilization is reflected in Delfina's history. She learned about protests and land occupations from her mother, who actively participated in actions led by tobacco workers advocating for better working conditions and access to land. As Delfina recalled, "when I was a 14-year-old girl, hunger was a pervasive issue in my household and community. This is why the men and women decided to reclaim the land; my family did not have a plot to grow cassava or corn to feed their children. Our parents and other adults occupied the land and taught us to do the same."¹⁸ In addition to asserting claims to the land, Delfina highlighted that women working in the tobacco industry also organized strikes to demand better working conditions and fairer payment. Delfina recalled how, in her youth, she accompanied her mother to meetings and public demonstrations held by women who cultivated tobacco in Ovejas, Sucre: "There was a time when we went on strike because tobacco prices were very low. We marched through the streets of Ovejas, day and night, demanding an increase in the price of tobacco since it was undervalued."¹⁹

For Delfina, these moments were essential to her growth as a peasant leader. Delfina's oral history highlights the significant role of mothers and grandmothers imparting their knowledge about domestic activities and tobacco processing, while also sharing their experiences and lessons learned from mobilizing against enclosures and unfair conditions. In her oral history, Delfina described how her mother taught her both the skills necessary for handling and working on tobacco crops and the importance of fighting for better living conditions. She recognized that women from the past left a legacy that she continued through her involvement

¹⁸ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

¹⁹ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

in the fight for land in the Caribbean: “They were our mothers. They taught us to be hard-working women.”²⁰ She considered these teachings to be part of the same chain of lessons she learned from her mother. In this case, the realm of reproduction, where peasant women and children acquired essential skills to sustain their families and communities, was also a space for sharing memories and instilling values and practices related to justice, land, and fair working conditions. The reproductive realm not only sustained life by fulfilling basic needs such as food, water, and physical care but also served, in Delfina’s case, as an essential space for sharing memories across generations. It played a crucial role in preserving traditions and practices aimed at resisting and challenging the ongoing enclosure of land and vital resources.

During those times, women were not allowed to hold land titles. Both Delfina’s mother and Delfina had few opportunities to acquire land except through their husbands. As scholarship has noted, the Agrarian Reform Law of 1961 followed a familistic approach that did not explicitly prohibit women from accessing land rights, but, in practice, it favored the male head of the household as the owner of land (Meertens, 2020, p. 61). The points system used by the Agrarian Reform Institute (Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria, INCORA) to identify beneficiaries of agrarian reform and land titles often favored male peasants, as it prioritized agricultural expertise and productive skills over other factors. The economic contributions of female peasants to families and estates were often overlooked as labor, which is why they were seldom recognized as beneficiaries of agrarian reform rights (Deere & León, 2002, p. 111). During this time, peasant women typically accessed land only after becoming widows of previous beneficiaries (Meertens, 2020, p. 61). Yet, they still actively participated in the struggle for land in the Caribbean, following the footsteps of their female predecessors. Delfina argued that, beyond land titles and land ownership, women were involved in the land struggle to assert their right to cultivate food for their families. According to her testimony, “our fight back then was for the communal lands and the *playones*.”²¹

Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1980) described Caribbean peasants’ fight for communal lands and *playones* (low-lying fields) as a result of their amphibious condition. He explained that agricultural practices in the Caribbean region are closely tied to the cycles of rivers and water bodies. During the dry season, when water levels drop, both peasants and cattle ranchers utilized the *playones* to grow food crops and feed the cattle. Conversely, in the rainy season, these floodplains became inundated, allowing peasants to fish and hunt in the flooded areas (p. 1:24b). This amphibious relationship between peasants and their environment, in which peasants adapted to the land and the water cycles, challenged the efforts of government authorities and landowners to privatize and define fixed boundaries for areas that were ecologically cyclical and mobile and that provided abundant resources for food and water provision for peasant communities.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, conflicts arose between landless peasants and landowners over the ownership of *playones*, with peasants usually being expelled from these areas and conflicts escalating rural violence in the region (Reyes Posada, 1978, p. 75). As a result,

²⁰ (March 2, 2023). Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

²¹ (March 2, 2023). Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

the government of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla issued Decree 1663 of 1956, which defined floodplains and *playones* as communal lands belonging to the nation and not subject to private appropriation.²² Rural protests that preceded the Agrarian Reform and continued during its initial years were characterized by grassroots, decentralized, and localized actions aimed at resisting land grabbing and defending these communal fishing and farming areas, crucial for the sustenance of peasant families in the region (Rivera Cusicanqui, 1982, pp. 74–75). The reproductive realm was thus at the core of the motivations for these early agrarian reform mobilization efforts. Delfina and Gustavo primarily occupied and claimed the *playones* and communal lands to provide food, water, and essential resources for their families, ensuring the daily sustenance. Their motivation for occupying the land went beyond securing land titles; it was fundamentally about asserting their right to nourish their families in the face of ongoing land accumulation and enclosures in the region.

The revision of newspapers from this period reveals that Delfina and Gustavo's struggle was not unique. Peasants' fight for *playones* and communal lands sparked various mobilization efforts throughout the Caribbean, which had been common even years before the Agrarian Reform Law was enacted. For instance, in August 1959, *Diario El Caribe* reported that a judge from Ciénaga, Magdalena, had ordered the eviction of 150 peasants from the village of "El Guáimaro," as a resolution to a dispute between the peasants and a landowner over the rightful ownership of some plots. According to a report from the regional Union of Workers (UTRAL), the lands in El Guáimaro consisted of small islands that had been left behind by the Magdalena River. UTRAL argued that these riverine formations, utilized by peasants to grow subsistence crops, should be considered communal lands and not subject to private appropriation. Despite the eviction order from the judge in Ciénaga, the peasants of El Guáimaro asserted their right to the plots and refused to leave the lands they had been cultivating for some time to guarantee their own subsistence.²³

In that same year, the newspaper reported the eviction of hundreds of peasants who had settled on an island formed by the currents of the Magdalena River in Soledad, Atlántico. In this case, the landowner claiming ownership of these lands sent a herd of livestock to destroy the subsistence crops that the peasants had grown, as a strategy to force them to leave. In response, peasants staged protests across the area, demanding that these plots of land not be treated as private property.²⁴ Cases like these illustrate the nature of land disputes that were common and persistent throughout the 1960s, the first decade of implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law in the Caribbean Colombia.

Delfina and Gustavo's oral histories underscore the widespread involvement of women and children in peasant mobilization during that time, highlighting the crucial roles they played in making mobilization possible. Particularly, their oral testimonies reveal how peasant women and children sustained peasant mobilization for communal lands through their reproductive labor. This active involvement extended the roles they had traditionally played within their

²² Decreto 1663. *Diario Oficial*. Bogotá, 31 de Agosto de 1956.

²³ Lanzamiento de 150 campesinos en el Guáimaro. (8 de agosto de 1959). *Diario El Caribe*.

²⁴ Problema de campesinos en Soledad. (12 de agosto de 1959). *Diario El Caribe*.

families and estates into the arena of protest and mobilization for land. Their testimonies highlight how the space of land occupation was permeated and enabled by the domestic activities performed by peasant women and children.

For example, Delfina and Gustavo emphasize that during land occupations, one of the main concerns was ensuring access to food and water. As a result, when occupying land, peasants prioritized establishing kitchens and bringing along essential kitchen tools such as pans, stoves, spoons, and knives. They also collected water in pots and dug wells. When transport over long distances was necessary, they often brought donkeys with them. Throughout these processes, the reproductive labor of peasant women and children was crucial for meeting the daily needs of their communities. Gustavo argued that “women always had to go to the land occupations, because they did the cooking. They would go to the land invasion to cook.”²⁵ During land occupations, peasant women and children performed crucial tasks similar to those they had done on the estates. They cooked, cleaned, collected and transported water, and cultivated subsistence crops. This time, their reproductive labor sustained and ensured the continuity of the struggle for communal lands in opposition to the increasing accumulation of land by landowners.²⁶

Gustavo fondly remembered a chant that brought joy and strength to peasants during the land occupation and that eloquently expresses that the food prepared by peasant women was a condition of possibility for the struggle:

When we gathered to work the land, we were happy and sang as we worked. We invaded the land with joy and enthusiasm, hoping that our hard work would pay off and bring happiness to the people through our *monte* songs. One of those songs mentioned, ‘my mother helps us work, cooking for us early so we can go to work, my friends. Because we are going to finish this, we are going to knock it down.’²⁷

Delfina emphasized that, beyond cooking, peasant women and children were involved in all stages of peasant mobilization and participated equally with men. For instance, she explained that a land occupation started when both peasant men and women entered the land to clear it: “Men and women would clean, remove the trunk, make huts out of palm leaves, and then look for a way to grow crops.”²⁸ They used to cultivate crops that were the easiest and fastest to grow, such as cassava or corn. Meanwhile, the peasants collected food provisions from nearby towns and received donations from other peasant communities around: “We would harvest together, go shopping, and prepare the food. Everything was very well organized.”²⁹ Peasant women were

²⁵ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Gustavo Causado, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

²⁶ These findings align with what Claudio Robles-Ortiz (2018) observed in his analysis of land seizures in the Chilean region of Panguipulli during the agrarian reform period. He noted that “women and even children would come to support the occupation by keeping fires, cooking meals, and acting as look outs” (pp. 612).

²⁷ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Gustavo Causado, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

²⁸ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

²⁹ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

involved in growing crops, building huts, protesting in the streets, participating in meetings, as well as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the daily needs of those around them.

When describing the mobilization process to occupy and claim the land, Delfina referred to herself as the “abrecaminos” of the land struggle, as she was responsible for guiding the peasants into the land they would occupy. With an oil lamp on her head, she led her fellow peasants into the land before sunrise to avoid being seen by guards or the estate's people: “We would leave at 3 o'clock in the morning with the oil lamp on our heads to light the way and open the path, ensuring that we could proceed without being seen by the police and gain entry.”³⁰ At times, she recalled being accompanied by her young son, who was just a little boy back then. This experience not only symbolized the important role that women and children played in leading peasants toward land but also underscored women's crucial contribution to preserving and passing on the mobilization traditions and practices to the new generations.

Delfina and Gustavo specifically remembered a land occupation led solely by peasant women in Ovejas, Sucre, during the early 1970s, a decade after the agrarian reform began. A group of peasant women occupied a piece of land called “El Playón,” which belonged to a landowner named José Salomé. Delfina remembered how women used the land on the outskirts of the “El Playón” estate to grow cassava after the rainy season had ended. During their 1 to 2 years of occupation, they managed to harvest cassava multiple times. In addition to cassava, they cultivated subsistence crops such as corn, yam, beans, and *ají dulce*. Peasant women from neighboring areas like Betulia, Sincé, Los Palmitos, and Ovejas joined them, bringing their children, food, and kitchen tools to support the occupation. Although they were unsuccessful in securing the land or gaining official recognition of these plots as communal lands from the Agrarian Reform Institute (INCORA), and negotiations with the landowner did not come to fruition, Delfina took pride in her leadership throughout this process. Peasant women united to gather resources to feed their families, and the effects of their collective efforts have endured to this day. Many of the female leaders from that time are still actively advocating for land rights and livelihoods within their communities, including Delfina herself.

Furthermore, women's leadership in the struggle for *playones* and communal lands demonstrates that, for them, land represented more than just a matter of ownership or property (Ojeda, 2022; Meertens, 2000). It embodied a fight for self-sufficiency, food security, and the ability to guarantee dignified conditions to sustain life on a daily basis. It was a fight that claimed the value of communal ways of managing life and care. In this case, the struggle for land was a fight for the commons (Federici, 2015, 2019); peasant women advocated for their right to grow food, access water, build their homes, and occupy lands without the restrictions, seizures and enclosure practices imposed by the expansion of large estates and subsequent privatization. They asserted their right to not live in precarity (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 22) and to occupy and transform a space with the values and practices that Caribbean peasant women have historically forged to sustain their own lives, as well as those of their families and communities (Cely Forero, 2022).

³⁰ (March 2, 2023). Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

However, the struggle for *playones* and communal lands across the Caribbean was often met with various waves of police repression. Scholarship indicates that in the 20th century, landowners increasingly formed connections with regional and national power structures (Guerra, 2020, pp. 99–100; Lozano, 2010, p. 25). When conflicts arose between peasants and landowners, the latter would leverage their political influence to ensure that the resolution favored their interests (Lozano, 2010, p. 25). This involved the deployment of police forces to dismantle and suppress land occupations and peasant protests. *Diario El Caribe* reported on these police interventions, and what is striking about their coverage is the emphasis on women and children as primary victims of police actions in the *playones*.

For instance, in March 1960, *Diario El Caribe* reported a conflict between landowners and peasants in an area known as “Isla Pensilvania” in Soledad, Atlántico. During the rainy season, this land formed an island that peasants used to cultivate subsistence crops. Renaldo Donado, a local landowner, claimed property rights over these *playones* and hired three police officers to evict the peasants. The police destroyed crops and huts that the peasants had built, arresting seven peasant men, “while the others were forced to flee, along with their wives and children.” The newspaper reported that this was the third time the police intervened this region and, in previous occasions, “the police ran over several children and attempted to take some women and girls as well.”³¹ In April 1960, *Diario del Caribe* updated the case stating that police officers returned to the *playones*, once again destroying the remaining crops and targeting peasant women: “When the police tried to evict the women from the huts where they lived, the women resisted. In response, the police used force, both in their actions and their words. They claimed that they were acting under the orders of the mayor.”³² This case not only illustrates the pervasive presence of peasant women and children in land occupations, but also highlights how they, and the daily activities they sustained, were primary targets of repressive actions. Through attacks on subsistence crops and households, the police and landowners intended to destroy and enclose the conditions that peasant women and children had made possible, crucial for sustaining life on a daily basis during land occupations.

In their oral histories, Delfina and Gustavo recalled how police interventions in land occupations drastically impacted peasant communities' ability to sustain basic living conditions for daily survival. Delfina argued that

The struggles for land in the past were very difficult. When the landowners got involved, the police mistreated the peasants, threw away the food we had, and uprooted the crops, without any regard for the children present. I vividly remember when we women took over the El Playón estate, the police came and kicked our food, turned it over, and threw it away. They also set fire to the huts we had built. We made sure to cover the children so they wouldn't see what was happening.³³

³¹ Atropellan campesinos en Soledad. (14 de marzo de 1960). *Diario El Caribe*.

³² Atropellos de la policía a campesinos de Sitionuevo. (6 de abril de 1960). *Diario El Caribe*.

³³ (March 2, 2023). Interview with Delfina González, peasant leader from Sucre. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

Similarly, Gustavo remembered that “during the land invasions, they would throw away our food. When we invaded, we always brought everything we needed to cook: pots, food, and everything else. We would light the stove, but then the police would arrive and kick the pots, leaving us without food.”³⁴ The attacks on women and children, as well as on households, pots, and subsistence crops, were not random acts of violence. Instead, they targeted the very foundation of mobilization, specifically the people, resources, and activities that made mobilization possible and guaranteed its continuation over time.

Conclusions

Both Delfina and Gustavo reminisced about the times of land occupations with nostalgia and joy. Gustavo argued that, at the time, peasants perceived the land occupations as opportunities to overcome the precarious situation produced by the lack of resources to feed their families: “It was very difficult for us to remember the struggles we faced. People cried from hunger, including the children. Many went to bed without eating. Things started to change when we, the peasants, organized and supported each other. Our comrades brought us food during the invasions, and we cooked it there.”³⁵

The reproduction labor involved in cooking, gathering food, and supporting one another to meet the basic needs of peasants is often celebrated in the chants and memories of those times. This highlights an important aspect of peasant mobilization for agrarian reform that has been overlooked in the literature on peasant politics in the Colombian Caribbean: the essential roles peasant women and children played in sustaining mobilization efforts to defend communal lands during the early years of agrarian reform. Although scholarship has thoroughly examined the large estate regime and peasants’ efforts to challenge it during the agrarian reform process, there has been little focus on the role of gender both to sustain capital accumulation and large estate expansion, as well as peasant mobilization in the Caribbean.

Examining gender in the context of the large estate expansion and peasants’ mobilization for communal lands reveals the complex role of reproductive labor performed by peasant women and children. On one hand, this labor was essential for sustaining life and labor on the large estates, contributing to their growth and upkeep. On the other hand, it also made possible peasants’ resistance against land accumulation and enclosures, and their defense of communal lands during the early stages of agrarian reform. Moreover, the study of the agrarian reform process from the perspective of women and children underscored that the struggle for land at the time extended beyond just obtaining land titles. At the heart of this struggle was the assertion of the commons, a fight to sustain life and care outside of the logic of large estate expansion and its practices of privatization and enclosure.

³⁴ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Gustavo Causado, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

³⁵ (March 2, 2023). *Interview with Gustavo Causado, peasant leader from Sucre*. El Piñal (Sucre, Colombia).

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