

CLAG Field Study Award - Report

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My dissertation project aims to understand the labor regimes and environmental transformations produced by the expansion of oil palm plantations in Colombia, by looking at plantation women workers' everyday experiences. My purpose is to delve into the processes of proletarianization and feminization of the labor force, the production of plantations towns, and the intimate and quotidian effects of these larger transformations.

Thanks to the CLAG Field Study Award I was able to travel to Colombia to do preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2021. I focused my fieldwork in four objectives: 1) to understand the history of oil palm plantations in the municipality of Cumaral, in the Colombian Llanos region; 2) to interview women workers about their labor trajectories and relations, and how their job intersects with their everyday life; 3) to explore institutional programs about rural workers and 4) to establish connections with women workers and local scholars and set the bases for my future research. Despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic in Colombia¹, I made 15 interviews to different actors: officers of the Food and Agriculture Organization, women and men working in the oil palm sector in Cumaral -some of them member of the *National Union of Workers of the Agroindustrial, Agricultural, Agri-food Sector*, communitarian leaders and scholars working on plantations in other regions of Colombia. I also visit Cumaral, and identified a specific place to focus my research on: Veracruz, a small town within this municipality.

Cumaral is located in the foothills of the Cordillera de los Andes, and holds one of the oldest plantations in the department of Meta. The expansion of oil palm started in the early 1970s encouraged by foreign investors, who also stimulated the migration of black workers from the Valle del Cauca, a region characterized by a large sugar cane industry. The workers established Veracruz, a small town that was described as *El Africa de los Llanos*: The Africa of the Llanos, because it is mostly populated by black people. This demographic composition is exceptional in the Llanos, a region without a colonial history of black enslavement but with violent racial hierarchies: indigenous communities that were systematically killed and enclosed in reservations, and a dominant population that identifies as “mestizos”, “whites” or “civilized people”.

¹ At the time of my fieldwork, Colombia was going through one of the worst moments of the pandemic: cases grew dramatically between June and July, the ICU reached its maximum capacity and many institutions closed or restricted in-person attention.



Oil palm truck in the unpaved roads of Veracruz, Cumaral

Veracruz grew as a plantation town, and currently the majority of its people work for or depends on someone's work in the oil palm companies. Moreover, the palm oil industry, both the crops and the oil production factories, is the main source of paid work in the municipality. This is especially relevant for women, who have few jobs offers and for whom this sector has higher salaries compared to the low wages in cleaning and catering. Many companies have encouraged women's incorporation to the plantations and factories to get certifications, such as the Roundtable of Sustainable Oil Palm Certificate, and be more competitive in the market. In this context, women's involvement in this extractive economy has increased over the last decades.

The incorporation of women into wage labor is based on and reproduces a hierarchical and unequal divisions of labor that exploit women's bodies inside and outside the plantation. Women are assigned to duties traditionally considered more feminine, such as cooking and cleaning, human resource management and health care. As in other economic sectors, these activities are less remunerated than those performed by men. Some women work in the field, especially in the nursery and as pollinators, but both jobs are considered less difficult to perform. Only a few are hired as fruit cutters, a better paid activity considered masculine. In addition to the wage gap between women and men, women also experience high levels of risk in the plantation, especially the pollinators. The risk is associated with the long walks through the plantation under the intense heat of the region, and the specific arrangements of the nature that

supports the plantation. The grass and palm foliage used to protect the soil and palm roots make walking difficult and hide holes and snakes from the workers' view, making the workday slower and riskier. Manager decisions to improve productivity, that are informed by scientific knowledge about the palm and the soil, shape women's experiences and bodies in the everyday.

Women's care activities at home are also involved in the plantation reproduction. In addition to their work in the plantation, they cook and care for their husbands, brothers and fathers that also work on the plantation. The women who do not work directly on the crops, take care of the children of those who are employed by the industry. Thus, women paid and unpaid labor contributes equally to the plantation economy.

Despite this inequality, women workers certainly challenge the sexual division of labor by breaking the traditional placement of women in the private space of the home. By challenging traditional notions and gender relations, they have also used their role as workers to gain social and economic independence. This independence is especially crucial for single, female-headed households. However, these gains are not without tensions. For women workers, the time constraints surrounding motherhood and family care part of the challenges and difficulties that arose with the feminization of the labor force.

Hence, by paying attention to rural workers, I want to bring together the analysis the everyday production of female labor force and how it contributes to the reproduction and



permanence of the plantation regime.

An oil palm plantation worker, Dolany (right), share her health issues after working the plantation for 10 years. Veracruz, Cumaral