

FEMINISM, TRADE UNIONISM AND THE RETIREMENT OF RURAL WORKING WOMEN¹

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Abstract: This article intends to explore part of the research project presented to the Graduate Program in Rural Studies at the Universidade dos Vales Jequitinhonha e Mucuri, Diamantina, Minas Gerais. The research intends to establish a tension between feminism and rural unionism in Vale do Jequitinhonha. Since this region of Minas Gerais is constantly linked to themes such as misery, eucalyptus monoculture, migration to sugarcane cutting, rural poverty, among other stigmatizing factors. However, our objective is to understand the role of rural unionism in Vale do Jequitinhonha and its relationship with feminism. To understand if there is an approximation with feminist theories and how such theories were interpreted. Considering the historical context of the formation of trade unionism in Brazil. Under these conditions, how unionized women who had a feminist training appropriated this discourse, since they are women who live in a culturally patriarchal and Catholic society. And so, from a perspective of access to social rights, was the feminist discourse an instrument of access to the social security rights of these rural women, aiming at the same time at the construction of citizenship and a more just and egalitarian society?

Keywords: Feminism, unionism; rural welfare; rural women.

INTRODUCTION

In this introduction, it is worth mentioning that since graduating in Law, I have been asking myself about the rights of Brazilian women. I, a black woman, the daughter of a black rural worker, trade unionist and community leader, suddenly find myself accessing a higher education course through Prouni (University for All Program). Since public higher education, for poor students from public schools, was very difficult, due

to the fact that admission was only through internal entrance exams, without any affirmative action or social inclusion policy. Then, in 2005, I entered the private university (PUCMG) through a public policy of access to higher education for low-income youth and quotas for blacks and browns. On this occasion, I studied Law and I am currently a lawyer and Master in Rural Studies at the public university (PPGER/UFVJM).

During my academic and professional trajectory, I constantly ask myself about women's rights in Brazil. Through the research, I sought to understand, from various perspectives on the construction and implementation of the social security law aimed at rural women workers. In addition to this foundation, another figure that guides me in my trajectory professional and academic is my father, whose political-union path began more than forty years ago, with the foundation of the Rural Workers Union of Congonhas do Norte, in 1975.

Another question that mobilized the investigation, which we partially present here, was in charge of my profession as a lawyer, inserted in a union space, especially in matters involving rural workers, social security and rural unionism. This way, workers were and are part of my professional daily life. Therefore, they deserve careful observation, so that we can understand how this rural population suffers from geographic isolation, scarcity of the existential minimum, such as health, education and justice, among other rights that are essential to them and that have already been guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. from 1988.

With these pillars, together with the relationship I built with rural women workers from Congonhas do Norte, I realized the importance of reflecting and researching on union activity, their rights and their reality, having as a reference the difficulties that

workers face on a daily basis. -day to access your rights. In this context, starting from the case study of two different unions that make up the geographical scenario of the Jequitinhonha Valley: Medina and Congonhas do Norte, we produced the investigative work, considering official documents of the INSS, semi-structured interviews with the union agents responsible for composing the social security processes, interviews with the two union leaders of the mentioned unions and the bibliographic review.

As a result of the reality of rural women and the analysis of feminist theories, the category we best identified to narrate the data was: rural women workers, because even though we realize that access to social rights guaranteed in the CF/88 stem from the social struggles of the movements feminists, black women's marches and daisies in the investigated rural world, many women still do not access feminist theoretical thinking. They, mostly black, with low education, work, resist and care, composing actions and meanings that indicate social memories of violence and resistance, of the patriarchal silencing that naturalized white supremacy, as hooks (2019) argues. Many access or have accessed part of the ideology of the feminist struggle by accessing social rights, such as unionization.

THE RESEARCH PATHS

Being a woman and a researcher is not an easy task, my supervisor once said about the present endeavor, even with all the obstacles that appear before us, we still resist with a strong fist to change the hegemonic academic thinking, whose spaces are contaminated by implied social norms and by patriarchalism of colonial origin and symbolic violence (LIMA, 2018, p. 76). I dialogue with this principle, insofar as I understand my trajectory and recognize myself as an Afro-descendant graduate student who, tirelessly, walked and

continue to walk an academic path of white/religious tradition. Nevertheless, I recognize myself as a beneficiary of "recognition policies" that made it possible for me to enter the intellectual world, which today I have equal conditions to reflect on and criticize. (LIMA, 2018, p. 77).

This way, my trajectory is mixed with the desire to research the rights of women who were socially and historically excluded as subjects of rights. In this sense, I made an immersion on the access of rural women workers to social security, specifically, to old-age pensions.

During the Master's course, the initial research project underwent changes in terms of objectives, theoretical and methodological outline. However, the essence of the research remained, since my intention was to understand how the right to retire still presents itself as an arduous path for these women, because even though it is a consolidated right in the country's constitutional order, rural women in the Jequitinhonha Valley still coexist with a history of denial and social exclusion.

This article reports to the abstract presented to the International Seminar Making Gender, held in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil in 2021 and when we were still organizing the qualification process with the Academic Master in Rural Studies at UFVJM, however, in addition to the abstract, we now meet with the defense of the investigation done. For this reason, we understand and assume that talking about rural unionism, feminism and the retirement of rural women workers is talking about a history of struggle, resistance, rights and consolidation of rural women's movements.

Therefore, the research came to fruition after I met a trade unionist from Vale do Jequitinhonha, in the city of Medina, at the event of the VII SINTEGRA (Integration Week: Teaching, Research and Extension),

Mrs. Evina Teixeira da Cruz, Mrs. president of the Union of Rural Workers of Medina, Minas Gerais, Brazil. Based on the proposal for union management developed in Medina with the Commission of Rural Workers, I was alerted to the restructuring of the research, since there were important elements regarding the issues involving gender relations and feminism in the union scope and its reflection on the rural women's lives.

After the qualification, in the dialogue with the bank, we understood that the focus of the research was on rural women workers and access to rural social security through the Rural Workers Union. Having as a research reference the case study of the experience of Medina and Congonhas do Norte, both municipalities in Minas Gerais, Brazil.

As Martins (2013), I understand that the sociologist researcher must drink from his own life story, that is, the memory and the experience to promote his inquiry as a researcher, so it was, from my experience within a union organization, which The questioning was born, which became the research problem and based on it, I was able to discuss/understand the implications that lead to the removal of rural women from their rights as rural workers, mainly rights related to rural social security.

About this, we can say that the Jequitinhonha Valley, a regional space in Minas Gerais, in which these rural women from Medina and Congonhas do Norte are inserted, is intrinsically related to oppression, gender violence, racial discrimination and social exclusion, since that the Jequitinhonha Valley transcends its regional portion, due to the secular exploitation of its natural resources, as well as the exploitation of enslaved human lives and due to the lack of investments in social policies, on the part of governments, which maintains a daily life of scarcity of social rights as a whole.

The research justification is centered on the conjuncture of rural working women who live in the rural areas of Medina and Congonhas do Norte, in the Upper and Middle Jequitinhonha region. These rural women have faces, they have identities, they have their workspace and ancestral knowledge that are not in line with the capitalist *modus* of the State and bourgeois society. Thus, most of them live only to support the family, along with their children, partner or husband. In a social structure that is made up of oppression, fear, violence and discrimination, often naturalized.

On the other hand, these women, for all their history of submission and hierarchical education, do not recognize themselves as workers, many of them are financially dependent on their husband/partner, as their work is not considered, reduced to a simple "help". This implies the criticism that Kergoat (2009) makes in relation to the sexual division of labor, which can be understood as a form of division of tasks based on the social relations of the sexes.

These tasks are not intended to be complementary, but "a relationship of power between men over women", their main characteristic is the distinction between what is considered women's work and what is men's work. domestic work, which can be understood as tasks that are directly related to the care of people, being performed at home, is free and invisible work. in its tribulations it is also the tasks of a political, religious and military nature, explains Kergoat (2009).

Montenegro (1981) states that the woman in the primitive community occupied a place of equality, in which she carried out the productive work carried out collectively, but from the change in the structures of the community society replaced "by the patriarchal family, the work of women became individualized, and, although

expelled from the creative economic universe, it fulfilled a fundamental economic function” (MONTENEGRO, 1981, p. 17).

Under the eyes of Azevedo (2019), what happened was an incorporation of customs into the legislation, reaffirming daily practices of Roman society and invalidating others, interfering in the private and domestic life of society causing estrangement, as there was “a reconfiguration of functions, rights and duties of *pater familias*”. (AZEVEDO, 2019, p. 2). Following the reasoning of Azevedo (2019), this debate that the patriarchy (*pater familias*) of Antiquity has as its precursor Engels² that “by postulating, through the analysis of productive forces, that patriarchy would have arisen from the development of agricultural and pastoral techniques, which led to a production of surpluses which men came to control and commercialize”

In Brazil, this reality was no different, the strong presence of the Catholic Church throughout the process of formation of society also imposed the cult of the Roman family, instituting a family moral model, owing, therefore, obedience to the figure of the *pater familias*. Araújo (2013) reveals that young women from bourgeois families in the Brazilian Colony underwent strict control by their father and people he trusted, sexuality was denied to them at all costs, as the rules of good customs and morals could not be violated. “The all-powerful Catholic Church exerted strong pressure on the training of female sexuality. The foundation chosen to justify the repression of women was simple: the man was superior, and therefore it was up to him to exercise authority” (ARAÚJO, 2013, p. 45-46).

Franco (2017), in dialogue with Perrot (1995); Del Priore (1998); SOIHET (1997) González (1984) among others, reaffirms that

2. “[...] from an evolutionary perspective, it situates the ancient patriarchies as belonging to a phase of Western civilization towards the bourgeois family. This proposition is explored by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1891)”. (AZEVEDO, 2019, p. 2).

in bourgeois society, there were black women, of African origin, who went through the process of slave labor, torture, sexual violence, that is, oppression was excessive. “They survived precariously, subhuman conditions, enslaved, oppressed and susceptible to multiple violence in their bodies and souls” (FRANCO, 2017 p. 2).

In this sense, the participation of black women in Brazilian society since colonial times, as the “milk nurse”, the cook, the companion, became naturalized to the point that society did not think that they could be and be in other spaces. It is on this scenario that a strictly patriarchal and sexist society is built, as is the case in Brazil, where there is constant surveillance by the Catholic Church of white women and the oppression and physical violence of black women. Franco (2017) *apud* González (1984).

This patriarchal tradition was established in the rural area, where women were subjected under the control of the father, the husband, in addition to the surveillance of religion, in a social space reduced to work in the fields, domestic work and raising children. It is in this oppressive apparatus that agrarian social relations are formed in Brazil, with the presence of working women in large estates. According to Silva (2013), “the figure of the settler woman appears in the rural areas of São Paulo at the moment when slave labor is replaced by free labor in export agriculture. This work system, which came to be known as the *colonato*, was adopted by coffee farmers in the last decades of the 19th century [...]”. (SILVA, 2013, p. 554-555).

It can be clearly seen that even white immigrant women and rural workers suffered from the male surveillance represented by the father, husband and boss. Silva (2013), highlights testimonies of settlers who said:

“My father didn’t need to talk to an agent, all he had to do was look, and we knew what he wanted or not” (SILVA, 2013, p. 558). In the research by Silva (2013), in addition to the settlers, another workforce used was blacks, mestizos, free workers, but without recognition as such.

Alongside the rural reality of São Paulo, there is the rest of the rural population of Brazil that, in the 19th century, found itself delivered to the sugarcane, cotton and coffee plantations, products destined for export. It must be noted that in the interior of Minas Gerais, the contingent of slaves freed by the Aurea law (1888), and the non-recognition as a person by the State and society, left them the streets, the vagrancy, which provided the free service, the continuity of the violation of the body as a form of survival. This “social imaginary built on black people was not positive [...], it enabled the incorporation of racial theories that attested to the inferiority of black people, the degeneration of the mestizo, the ideal of whitening, the permissiveness of black culture and racial democracy.” recalls (SILVA ET AL, 2005, p. 42),

With the modernization of agriculture in the 50s and 60s, rural women workers, according to Silva (2013), were expropriated from their workforce, since they were no longer linked to the family in the figure of the father or husband, the From that moment on, they sell their labor on the market, that is, “women were absorbed and subjected to an intense process of exploitation and domination, predominantly in the sugarcane, orange and coffee plantations. Women started to work in sugarcane cutting, coffee, oranges and cotton, peanuts” (SILVA, 2013, p. 562). Rural women workers are inserted in this agrarian capitalist

market, however, the patriarchal structures of subalternity do not change and they remain at a lower level compared to men, even assuming double working hours between home and work, wages are low, in addition to being subjected to sexual harassment and denial of rights such as registration, says Silva (2013).

There is clear discrimination against rural women, whether due to the lack of recognition of their work, the precariousness of their salary, or simply because they are working women, who get on the truck, as portrayed by Martinez-Alier (1979) in the daily life of women. proletarianized rural women workers, in the 70s, on the Águas Claras farm³, where the so-called gang truck, which picks up, every morning, the majority of working women, “[...] About thirty of these are women, divided equally between young women and middle-aged married women. These women work in groups in the fields” (MARTINEZ-ALIER, 1979, p. 71). Still in the description of Martinez-Alier (1979) “the trucks are what in this area is called the gang truck. The transported persons are collectively called a gang. Individually, they are known by the public and the press as “flyers” or “bóias-frias⁴” (MARTINEZ-ALIER, 1979, p. 71).

Most of these female rural workers were from other places, were and still are women from here, from the Jequitinhonha region of Minas Gerais, there are countless stories of migrant women who leave with their families in search of better living conditions. Silva (2004), an important researcher on migrants from the Jequitinhonha Valley, tells one of these stories, whose wife, Maria, left the grottos of the Jequitinhonha Valley, a worker and also a praying woman, migrated with her family to the state of Paraná, Mato Grosso

3. “Fazenda Águas Claras, located about 100 km northeast of the city of São Paulo, is, in many ways, typical of large properties in the interior of the state. It covers approximately 1,300ha of rich rocky land, one third covered in coffee”. (MARTINEZ-ALIER, 1979, p. 70).

4. For Martinez-Alier (1979), the cold-wives mean people who do not have a fixed place of work and the food, when they eat, is already cold.

and São Paulo in the search for employment and survival, worked on a coffee farm as sharecroppers, occupied indigenous lands, were expelled, in São Paulo, Maria worked in the sugarcane mills, but her husband for health reasons was unable to work, With unemployment, difficulties increased, which was the reason for the family to seek Feraesp (Federation of Rural Employees of the State of São Paulo), in Araraquara, to register as land claimants. Since then, the family lives in the Bela Vista Settlement, as the owner of a plot, and considers that their dream has come true. (SILVA, 2004, p. 65).

Despite the social relations of accentuated inheritance of male domination, as Reis (2018) reveals, there are groups of rural women who are engaged in some political action or in social movements to face this tradition and reformulate new forms of social relations in the public and private. Therefore, they represent and assume their identities and cultures of resistance, such as black women, belonging to remaining quilombo communities, rural women workers, movements organized in various entities, such as NGOs, Churches, Unions, associations, in order to position themselves facing the countless forms of violence, including male domination, sexual violence, prejudice and discrimination based on race, sex and color in the rural daily life where they are inserted.

Matos (2017) emphasizes the strength of black rural women in the face of a patriarchal and racist society, since they fight and participate politically, they are community, union, quilombola, religious, agroecology leaders, among others (MATOS, 2017, p. 21).

In the conception of this researcher, the stories of these women must be recognized, in the context of an agrarian country, in which women from an early age begin the routine of working on the land, having to leave schooling in the background, most only sign the name.

To situate ourselves in time, our focus was the period between 2008 and 2016, in which Brazil was in the second term of former President Lula, of the Workers' Party (PT), whose political orientation embraced the banners of social inclusion, affirmative actions and social movements, among others, and by the government of the first female president elected by the Brazilian people. Beforehand, in the conception of Jesus e Silva (2019), the governments led by the PT had a social policy that managed to reach the poorest population, going in the opposite line of the previous government of FHC (Fernando Henrique Cardoso). On the other hand, in 2015, President Dilma Rousseff suffered an impeachment process that culminated in her removal from the government and Vice President Michel Temer took over with a series of austerity measures and cuts in spending that abruptly reached social rights, mainly the social security legislation and the flexibilization of labor laws, in addition to the weakening of the work of the working class unions.

Another point that marks this time is the enactment of Law nº 11,718 of 2008, which created the rural worker contract for a short term, established transitional rules on the retirement of rural workers, includes article 38-A in Law nº 8213/91 (social security benefits) creating the RURAL CNIS (Social Information Registry), made possible through technical cooperation between the INSS - National Institute of Social Security and the confederations, federations and unions of rural workers, it is important to emphasize that with the pension reform (Law no. 13,846, of 2019), part of the article that spoke of this cooperation with entities of class has been deleted.

Considering, therefore, our time frame and the mediating role of rural workers' unions, we will briefly discuss the problem of Brazilian

rural unionism, from a gender perspective, even though we have feminist discussions as a backdrop, we chose to use the category of analysis “women rural workers”, because we cannot say that in the regions where the surveyed unions operate, feminist thinking is a social consensus, that is, women are still moved to traditional patriarchal knowledge and practices. In the union struggle, in the educational inserts, in the public marches, the theoretical concepts are appropriate, but they reveal the contradictions between rural union history and the feminist social movements demanding urban and rural union struggles that led to the unification of Church, State. and unionism in facing the so-called ‘social question’ in the 50’s and 60’s, context in which we place the foundations of rural unions under study.

As for rural unionism, in the words of Stein (2008), it emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as a movement aligned with the Brazilian Communist Party (PTB), the Catholic Church and other groups. The “agricultural union issue” has become a priority for popular organizations in the joint effort for citizenship. The symbol of this effort was the holding of the first conference of agricultural workers and farmers, which gave rise to the creation of the União dos Lavradores e Trabalhadores Agrícolas do Brasil (ULTAB), and the formation of the movement by the Peasant Leagues, both in 1954. In Minas Gerais, it was only in 1968 that the Federation of Agricultural Workers of the State of Minas Gerais (FETAEMG) was founded. According to information from Fetaemg itself, “at that time there were already almost thirty Unions of Rural Workers, but only five (Poté, Araçuaí, Esmeraldas, Brumadinho and Três Pontas) were able to participate in the foundation of FETAEMG because they were recognized by the Ministry of Labour”. (FETAEMG, *on-line*, 2017).

The current conjuncture of rural unionism has its signature in the redemocratization of the country, since they united in favor of the fall of the Dictatorship and the new paradigm of democracy. According to studies by Aguiar (2016), it is worth saying that “the mobilization of rural women is not formed in union practice, but from debates on living conditions carried out in small groups, most of them with a religious matrix linked to pastorals, but also groups of a secular matrix of resistance mobilizations and expulsions of residents of farms” (GIULIANI, 2013, p. 643). In the 1970s, the rural women’s movement took shape politically and formed “several groups of women from rural areas who acted in different ways, according to the specific needs of each region”. (AGUIAR, 2016, p. 266). The movement of rural women workers currently participate in grandiose projects created by themselves, such as the Marcha das Margaridas, which has integrated actions with the World March of Women (WMM), in addition to popular education projects, combating violence against women. in the countryside, against racism and sexism.

In addition to a food security agenda that encompasses the agroecological movement of women, with the motto: “without feminism there is no agroecology”, that is, it expresses the constant reflection of the trajectory of rural women, the experiences and struggle against multiple forms of oppression, reports Pimenta (2008). Rural women actually seek citizenship, whose landmark is the 1988 constitutional text, which inaugurates a new situation of access to fundamental rights for all citizens regardless of race, color, sexual orientation and gender.

The Federal Constitution of 1988, forcefully expands the social rights of Brazilian society, including urban and rural workers in the protection of work, as well as in the social security system, according

to articles 6^o and *caput* of the article 7^o, however, the difficulties were so great and this new scenario was far from being a just and egalitarian society.

In this perspective, social rights integrate the thought that the State is the guarantor of the existential minimum through public policies for education, health, social security, housing, among other services. (FIGUEIREDO and JUBILUT, 2013, p. 249). Regarding the right to retirement of rural women workers, it only became a reality with the Federal Constitution of 1988, in the words of (BRUMER, 2002, p.) the magna letter together with “Laws 8,212 (Cost Plan) and 8,213 (Benefit Plans), from 1991, began to provide for universal access for the elderly and disabled of both sexes in the rural sector to social security, under a special regime” [...] with due proof of the conditions, according to art. 195, §8 of the Federal Constitution of 1988.

THE CASE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCE OF MEDINA AND CONGONHAS DO NORTE

Telling about the trade union experience of Medina and Congonhas do Norte, regarding access to social security for rural women workers, especially regarding retirement by age, is actually opening the windows that have always been closed for these women, it is giving voice to the silence on the historical denial of the right to women and, above all, to black women, is to denaturalize all forms of discrimination based on sex, race and rural work, since they are women who do not recognize themselves as workers, but as helpers, as aggregated. The perception that we were working with the naturalization of violence directed at black women and that these were naturalized in rural daily life,

5. Art. 6º - Social rights are education, health, food, work, housing, transport, leisure, security, social security, maternity and childhood protection, assistance to the destitute, in the form of this Constitution.

6. Art. 7º, *Caput*: Art. 7th These are the rights of urban and rural workers, as well as others aimed at improving their social condition.

due to the denial of the place of production of women, reduced to “household”, “helper”, we went to the field research. First, at the Congonhas do Norte trade union, I, as a participant of the place, distanced myself to reflect on space and doing it, placing myself as a researcher. So, when analyzing and reflecting the light of the study, I realize how much those rural working women were in the circle of gender oppression. Circle that involves the state, represented by the INSS, as it sees these women in a pejorative way, because the rural worker cannot have vanity, put on lipstick, wear clothes that are not torn. The circle involves the union, because in it there is no representation of women, there is no Commission of Rural Women Workers, or an organized movement of women within the union, the result of a religious patriarchal ideological heritage that has a strong presence in Alto Jequitinhonha.

In the case of Medina, I made two visits, the first at the invitation of a Master’s professor, and the second, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first was a very remarkable experience with regard to the Committee of Rural Women Workers of STR Medina, since 1991, it has been active in the union, mainly because of the union’s relationship with the ideological movement of the liberation theory of the Catholic Church and the In ecclesial base communities, women find in religious meetings a way of giving voice to their silences, their anxieties, often linked to domestic violence, gender discrimination.

Despite the approximation between unions and church and the divergent forms of manifestation of doctrinal orientation in unions (conservative and or progressive), we found that there is similarity in both union entities. Interviews with union agents in

Medina and Congonhas do Norte pointed to the obstacles that rural women workers, mostly black, need to overcome so that they can effectively access retirement based on rural age. They are obstacles: illiteracy or low schooling, since the rigor of written, formal documentation and the bureaucratic administrative process, enhances their exclusion from accessing the long-awaited benefit. It was evidenced in the interviews, the discrimination of society, the state and the women themselves, who naturalizing the place of subalternity, appoint themselves as helpers, assistants, and thus, do not perceive themselves as the rural workers. Low schooling makes them dependent.

Sexism is revealed in the absence of the legal documents that entitle the father, the husband, which silences the entire trajectory of resistance and struggle and a lot of heavy work of rural women workers. Finally, still in common, it is evident that the two unions are the mediating agencies between them and the state, but that they need actions aimed at women, in the recognition of the place of workers, and in our understanding, this implies denaturalizing the silencing of symbolic, psychological, patrimonial, moral and physical violence directed at blackness, personified in the white supremacist patriarchy that permeates the rural world studied.

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