

The Fruits of Labour: The Role of Globalisation in Reinforcing, Disrupting and Reshaping Gender Norms & Relations among Chile's Agri-workers

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Abstract

This article examines how the processes of globalisation serve to reinforce, disrupt, and reshape gender norms and relations in Chile. Chile has long since been subject to political corruption and societal disruption, but it was the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet and his neoliberal economic policies that reconfigured many aspects of life for Chilean farmers, both male and female. This article contextualises its core arguments in a case-study of the fruit market in Chile's commercial agriculture sector. This article argues that the processes of globalisation operate as a double-edged sword that can transform labour patterns and gender dynamics for better and worse.

Key Words:

Chile, neoliberalism, globalisation, gender

Introduction

‘Women workers are often the majority and almost always the fastest-growing sector of the labour force. Women sew Levis jeans in Guatemala, wash IBM computer chips in the Philippines, assemble RCA televisions in Indonesia, process broccoli and strawberries in Mexico.’ (Tinsman, 2004).

The globalisation of the agricultural industry in many countries in the Global South has stimulated a feminisation of the commercial agricultural labour force, specifically within the context of Latin American countries (Ilie & Dumitriu, 2014). Most scholars agree that between 1980-2012 most Latin American countries experienced varying degrees of trade growth and economic expansion. This required a larger, more diversified workforce, which in turn required tapping into a portion of the population previously untapped – women (Ilie & Dumitriu, 2014) & (Tinsman, 2004). With the onset of the neoliberal agenda and the subsequent economic changes it induced, an increasingly globalised world has been fostering changes amongst existing gender compositions within labour forces and markets. Evolving patterns in employment, production and the consumption of goods has necessitated an increase in female participation in many spheres of labour which has yielded unbalanced, though not entirely negative results. Benería et al. believe that such rapid transformations have had ‘differential impacts on men and women workers...the feminisation of the labour force and decline in men’s labour force participation in many countries have been integral to the labour market transformations’ (Benería et al., 2016). This quote accurately describes the impact of globalisation on Chile’s agro-industry and the feminisation of its agricultural labour force from the 1980s onwards (Tinsman, 2004). This article examines the effects of the processes of globalisation on Chile’s commercial agriculture sector and how such processes have and continue to reinforce, disrupt, and reshape gender norms and relations in all domains of life.

Processes of Globalisation

Globalisation, a phenomenon that began to gain traction during the 1970s, became the main driver in boosting countries’ economies through a series of transnational processes. Such transnational processes would be greatly inhibited without the development of new technologies and the shift to a neoliberal agenda (Benería et al., 2016). The neoliberal agenda prioritises above all, individualised profit-making, which by proxy alters behaviours and belief-systems to fall in alignment with garnering profit. Facets of the neoliberal agenda that were accelerated through Structural Adjustment Plans (SAPs) include the privatisation of welfare and social services, deregulation of the market, free trade policies/trade liberalisation, and reconfiguring industries towards mass and transnational production (Benería et al., 2016). This economic framework sets the stage for the processes of globalisation to come into effect. A core process of globalisation, and the one this essay shall primarily focus on is globalisation’s reliance on the labour of those in the Global South (Elson & Pearson, 1984). Hence, processes

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such as outsourcing labour to countries with a surplus of cheap labour, employing migratory and temporary workers are all made possible by the intertwining of an economic agenda that requires such labour as well as the globalised trade processes that enable it.

A key process of globalisation is that of trade liberalisation and market expansion (Benería et al., 2016). Confirming this as a key process of globalisation is Benería et al., opining that – ‘trade liberalisation and export orientation of production have been instrumental in promoting the expansion of international trade and investment’ (Benería et al., 2016). A consequence of such a process is the subsequent lack of protection for workers as framed by Elson & Pearson in their exposition on women’s role in the internationalisation of factory production – ‘workers in world market factories have been left exposed by the abrogation of their rights on such matters as minimum wage payments...limitations on the length of the working day and week, security of employment’ (Elson & Pearson, 1984). Though Elson & Pearson’s article is dated by over 30 years, the reliance on antiquated and insecure systems of employment continues to predominate. This can be seen in recent results released by the National Statistics Institute (INE) that over 90% of women employed in the agri-sector are only employed for three months or less (Olguín, 2022). Hence, separate to the inadequate conditions associated with the physical work, the short-term contracts of female labourers heighten overall employment precarity as well as trapping many *temporeras* in a cycle of three-month stints disallowing them from upwards mobilisation in any one establishment (Olguín, 2022). Such a gendered process of globalisation can clearly be seen in the commercial agricultural sector with a glaring delineation in the division of labour based on gender often subjecting women to harder work for less pay than that of their male counterparts. Additionally, this limits their ability to upward mobilise, confining them to positions concentrated at the bottom of Global Value Chains (GVCs) (Barrientos, 2001).

The consequences of attempting to keep up with such demands for goods often require increasing the demands put upon the female labour force, reinforcing and/or metastasizing existing gender inequalities. World market factories benefitted in employing women due to the lower expenditure rates on female labour during the genesis of Pinochet’s neoliberal economic expansion programme: ‘female labour must either be cheaper to employ...or have higher productivity (than men); the net result being that unit costs of production are lower with female labour’ (Elson & Pearson, 1984). Such practices are still in effect in Chile’s fruit sector as seen in the evidence provided in Pia Olguín’s in-depth investigation into *temporeras* working during Chile’s cherry harvest. Olguín’s research builds on the arguments made by Elson & Pearson, arguing that due to the diversification of employment patterns in the agro-industry under Pinochet’s regime, the systemic gender discrimination in effect *then* have indisputably set the trend for *now*, as the same conditions (job precarity, lower pay, overwork and inadequate working conditions) have been allowed to persist. The numbers of women being employed as *temporeras* will only continue to rise due to an ever-increasing demand for higher quality and more exotic fruits supplied with more efficiency. For example, between 2017-2018 the number of female workers in the fruit sector increased to 93.4%, while pay did not (Olguín, 2022).

Globalisation & Chile's Agri-sector

Using Chile and its commercial agricultural sector as a case study, this section of the article shall examine how the processes of globalisation orchestrate to reinforce existing gender norms and gender relations within the lives of female agricultural workers in Chile. When dictator Augusto Pinochet overthrew the socialist government in 1973, his first port of call was economic expansion by way of the commercialisation of agriculture through export specialisation (Tinsman, 2004). Chile's agricultural landscape, formerly consisting of sprawling patrón-owned, peasant-famed Haciendas and meagre campesino (peasant) farm-holdings underwent an aggressive makeover, transforming it into a highly technological behemoth exporter of fruits. Chile has since become the main exporter of out-of-season fruits which are now made available year-round. According to researcher Heidi Tinsman, by 1987 – 'Chile's international fruit sales grossed almost half a billion dollars' (Tinsman, 2004). Throughout the process of such massive agrarian reforms, Chile sought to include women in its agricultural schemes. Such inclusion was successful: over the course of a decade (1982-92), 'the female agricultural labour force increased by 296%' (Barrientos, 1997). The bulk of this employment is concentrated in the exportation of fruit.

Due to such western globalised processes utilised by Pinochet, such as policies of economic liberalisation and mass expansion, the Hacienda system suffered and thousands of campesino families were displaced due to the buying up of arable land by private investors acting on behalf of multinational market actors (Barrientos, 1997). Rural farmers relocated to cities contributing to the now massively urbanised Chile. The workers remaining in now poverty-stricken rural areas became reliant on factory wage labour during the peak season men and women sought employment in the commercial agricultural sector. This demand for employment compounded already precarious labour laws in Chile and enabled an environment of employment precarity and gender segregated employment to flourish formally- 'liberalisation of the labour market which removed most employment protection and low real wages facilitated a low-cost labour force, which was one of the "comparative advantages" of Chilean fruit exports' (Barrientos, 1997). Such "comparative advantages" would be later exploited based on gender as well as reinforcing widely held beliefs regarding women, their role, their value, and their professional capabilities.

Such forms of employment bear the trademark stamps of globalisation as seen above; a core trademark of a globalised labour market is that of job precarity that sustains the free market. Inherent to the very language used to describe the employment of thousands of Chilean women – *temporera*, meaning temporary female labourers - it is evident that this facet of a globalised labour force is in full effect in the commercial agricultural sector in Chile. Barrientos' research confirms this, as she states that 52% of female employment in the fruit market is temporary versus a paltry 5% of permanent female employment in the same sector (Barrientos, 1997). Whereas among their male counterpart's permanent employment in the same sector lies at 95% (Barrientos, 1997). This article argues that such disparities exist due to the reinforcing of unequal value meted out to female versus male labour. The 95% permanent employment of men is equivalent to that of a primary sector attributing more value to their

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labour, while female permanent employment at 5% is attributed little or no value in the same sector. Such meagre doling out of value is predicated on the belief that because a woman is performing the task it is fundamentally less valuable and hence is worth less money. This is a primary disadvantage of the gender dimensions to globalisation and the processes it is reliant on. Elson and Pearson attribute this unequal distribution of merit and the feminisation of job precarity to the belief that formal labour is secondary to a woman's primary role of childbearing, thus relegating the need for employment to the margins of her worth (Elson & Pearson, 1984).

On account of this it can be argued that the processes of globalisation are inherently sexist, preying on antiquated belief systems that women are less likely to unionise, more likely to work in poor conditions and are harder workers due to their 'docile' nature. However, this imbalance is not entirely unfavourable as during peak season women working longer hours than their male counterparts in better conditions and with flexible pay earn much higher wages as it is their labour that is essential to the export of such products (Barrientos, 1997). Such a silver lining is also not without its drawbacks; according to Tinsman, this upsurge in pay destabilises the power balance within households, with men feeling threatened and thus, exercising their control through other means such as increases in domestic violence, desertion, and commandeering the wages of their female spouses (Tinsman, 1997).

Gender Norms & Relations – Reinforced

Chile, a staunchly Catholic and highly gender-divisive society at the time of such agrarian reforms (Tinsman, 2004), relegated women to forms of labour that scholar Saskia Sassen dubs 'the 'invisible' labour of women producing food (Sassen, 2002). However, with the rapidly expanding fruit sector requiring more manpower and the seasonal nature of such labour, Pinochet's regime began to recruit campesinas in the thousands to undertake labour, specifically in fruit-packing plants (Tinsman, 2004). Temporeras experienced capitalist exploitation solely based on their gender, whereupon existing gender norms were reinforced due to the segregation of the genders further through the medium of labour and for many women, a disadvantageous worsening of gender relations ensued (Tinsman, 2004).

How do the processes of globalisation continue to reinforce gender norms and relations Chile's entrance into global markets? Firstly, as previously discussed, globalisation often preys upon existing gender inequalities in order to maintain its functions. One of these inequalities is that of the unequal distribution of unremunerated care work undertaken by women in the domestic sphere. Chile, predisposed to gendered divisions of labour, expects its women to perform most of the unrecognised domestic labour. Thus, where campesinas previously tended to family crops on or near the homestead contributing to a husband's earnings, while carrying out other domestic tasks, women have been outsourced to packing plants, removing them from the home (Tinsman, 2004). At first glance, one may wonder how this reinforces gender norms – surely it disrupts them and often for the better? Yet, in actuality, campesinas, now temporeras, return home after 10-to-16-hour shifts earning piece-rates, to perform a second 'job' uncompensated: 'they returned exhausted from work to additional daily labours of cooking and

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cleaning’ (Tinsman, 2004). The unresolved disparity in care work undertaken by male and female spouses is reinforced to the detriment of many women on account of such processes of globalisation that assume narrow conceptualisations of what constitutes labour; failing to consider the myriad of roles both paid and unpaid expected of a working mother (Amelina & Lutz, 2018). This is but one example of how the processes of globalisation, such as the reliance on women as ‘reserves of cheap labour’ (Kelly, 1981), serve to reinforce gender norms as well as increasing the burden of labour overall. Secondly, gender norms are further reinforced from a supposed biological perspective within Chile’s commercial agricultural sector. Temporeras are concentrated primarily in pruning and fruit-packing factories especially during peak season. The principal reason for the concentration of female labourers in these roles is not because of a preordained biological skill set but because of the reinforcement of archaic beliefs that rely on the gendered notion that women are more ‘nimble fingered’ (Elson & Pearson, 1984) and handle the fruit with care due to their intrinsic maternal instincts. The gendered norm that declares women are more inclined to undertake time-consuming and monotonous tasks due to their subdued nature clarifies why they are concentrated at the lower end of this GVC. Not only does this undermine female labour it further reinforces gender norms propounding that women are biologically predisposed to submission and should be treated as such.

Researcher Fernández Kelly maintains that the agroindustry profits off existing cultural norms in rural regions of Chile, where women tend to be viewed as eternal subordinates and their income as merely supportive to that of their husbands: ‘from a sociological point of view, what agro-industrial capitalists have done is to make use of certain social and cultural characteristics of the region to achieve certain goals’ (Kelly, 1981). This culture-defined perspective on the relationship between women and paid labour further compounds employment precarity for female labourers – the temporary nature of female labour in the commercial agriculture sector is allowed to persist as it is viewed only right that such employment be temporary in order to maintain ‘prevailing family structures’ (Kelly, 1981). This ideological imbalance rests on the processes of globalisation that continue to perpetuate gender norms, hindering women’s ability to operate as equals within the labour market as it is cheaper for multinationals to allow such gender norms to persist.

The above section has endeavoured to illustrate how historic processes of globalisation – namely the precarity of female employment in the commercial agroindustry in Chile made possible by the neoliberal marketisation of the fruit market – continue to reinforce existing gender norms and further segregates men and women on the fault lines of gender and employment. The arguments of Barrientos, Kelly, Elson & Pearson support this essay’s belief that though increasing female participation in the labour force is an advantage created by globalised processes of trade liberalisation and workforce expansion, we must always apply a gender lens and query – what kind of employment is being offered and who does it truly benefit, as summed up by Kelly: ‘wage levels, working conditions, stability... offered by this industrial employment could simply amount to a new kind of exploitation and subordination of... women’ (Kelly, 1981).

Gender Norms & Relations – Disrupted

Having examined how the processes of globalisation at play in Chile's commercial agricultural sector began the continuum of reinforced gender norms and relations, this section of the article shall investigate how gender norms and relations are disrupted by the same mechanisms. This article investigates what it has identified as the two major disruptions to gender norms and relations: 1) how female employment in fruticulture has increased bargaining power threatening patriarchal power structures within the domestic sphere giving way to increased levels of domestic violence; 2) exposure to Agri-pesticides and toxins inducing illnesses and reproductive issues disrupts the distribution of domestic tasks in the home as women are unable to carry them out and a loss of perceived value due to these ailments disrupting conjugal unions and increasing levels of spousal desertion.

While researching this subject, a common theme that emerged in the relationship between globalisation, the market and gender relations was the threat to masculinity when women began participating in the public sphere and earning wages (Lim, 2005). Moreover, due to the long hours worked by temporeras, spouses rarely interact giving way to rising marital tensions – 'women's relations with spouses...became tense and combative because of...women's need to work, and the reality that husbands and wives rarely saw each other. Such conflict contributed to increased male home abandonment...and heightened domestic violence' (Tinsman, 2004). Such increases do not only occur due to women being employed in the commercial Agri-sector, but heightened levels of domestic violence become a by-product of women's increased bargaining power due to earning their own wages. The state policies in existence often foster higher rates of unemployment among men as women are favoured for more skilled labour such as fruit-packing due to the belief that they are 'gentler' when handling delicate fruits (Olguín, 2022). This type of labour provides women with better pay and more hours leaving many men unemployed, without a sense of identity and falling prey not only to the strains of poverty but to perceived emasculation in a society where gender roles are firmly ingrained.

This results in a release of aggression on female spouses for mere catharsis as well as faulting them with the emasculation of their husbands due to their paid labouring which disrupts the gendered norm of husband=breadwinner, overall aggravating gender relations (Tinsman, 1997). Additionally, as women were removed from the private/domestic sphere to keep their families out of poverty, they were exposed to male interactions that did not remain within the parameters of family. This gives rise to male sexual jealousies, unfounded claims of promiscuity and claims of job theft from men to interact with other men (Tinsman, 1997). These reasons compound to increase incidences of severe domestic violence, an undeniable disruption to gender relations due to the recalibration of globalisation-induced gender norms – 'these conflicts sprang directly from the weakening of men's economic positions as the emerging fruit export economy undermined prior-forms of worker security' (Tinsman, 1997).

The second cause for globalisation's disruption to gender norms and relations is that of the physical toll such labouring takes on the body. Tinsman's research dictates that due to prolonged exposure to agricultural pesticides and chemicals, many women experienced a

myriad of maladies detrimental to their health as well as their domestic lives (Tinsman, 2004). Such maladies include – respiratory illnesses/failure due to chemical inhalation, birthing foetuses that suffer physical deformities due to the mother’s exposure to harmful toxins, miscarriages, and dermatological conditions catalysed by handling pesticides used in commercial agriculture (Tinsman, 2004). Not only do such ailments jeopardise a female labourer’s ability to earn due to the piece-rate pay system, temporeras do not receive medical benefits/insurance from their employers and thus lose wages from illness as well as paying for medical treatment (Tinsman, 2004). One may rebuff – it is the same case for male labourers working in the same industry, how are women more adversely effected than their male counterparts? Firstly, a study conducted at universities in Talca, Chile and Valparaíso, Chile found that of the 1,503 women who participated in the questionnaire over half (57.9%) reported one or multiple instances of violence – oftentimes gynaecological violence - experienced within the public health system (Cárdenas- Castro & Salinero-Rates, 2023). Many of the women interviewed belong to native ethnic groups, are members of the LGBTQIA+, are elderly and/or have lower levels of formal education (Cárdenas- Castro & Salinero-Rates, 2023). Statistics such as these coupled with the lack of medical insurance and benefits as well as the physical toll of the type of employment, all compound to posit women at a higher disadvantage than that of their male counterparts. If a temporera experiences an employment-related illness, not only is she unable to afford medical care due to the piece-rate pay system she may be reluctant to seek such necessary care due to the risk of violence.

The domino effects of such work-induced illnesses see that women are further restricted to the confines of their homes, relegating them to the private sphere. This divides the genders further, disrupting the rhythms of families where both spouses work and removing women from public life. Moreover, such repercussions disrupt the fledgling acceptance and understanding that women too have the right to engage in the public sphere as well as employment. This removes women’s voices from conversations surrounding adequate working conditions as well as recognition for the far-reaching arms of such consequences, which are undeniably gendered (Tinsman, 2004). For instance, a temporera who falls ill due to her employment in the commercial agricultural sector inhibits her from earning, lowering her chances of upwards mobilisation and job security; this in turn creates stresses and oftentimes marital strife increasing the risks of GBV compounded by the fact that she is unable to perform in her role as wife and perform her expected domestic duties due to illness, leading to yet more disruption between the genders within the domestic sphere. This was evident in many of the testimonies collected by researcher Heidi Tinsman, wherein many of the temporeras interviewed described physical altercations that occurred between spouses when work-related illnesses prevented wives from fulfilling various duties predetermined by her gender (Tinsman, 2004). This section has sought to illustrate how the structure of the commercial agricultural sector in Chile often serves to disrupt gender relations and further entrench gendered norms within the collective psyche of Chilean society.

Gender Norms & Relations – Reshaped

The final section shall outline the ways in which gender norms and relations are being reshaped within the Chilean commercial agricultural sector. Tinsman asserts that much of the literature documenting the so-called ‘plight’ of female Chilean Agri-workers often eliminates ‘the positive effects that female wage work, despite its exploitative nature, may have had on other spheres of women’s lives’ (Tinsman, 2004). While researching this article, much of the literature utilises victimising language, framing women as passive instead of active market players in the labour force. We must reshape our language in order to reshape how such language is then enacted i.e., situating women as victims of a system that excludes them rather than placing them inside a system they have the agency to change. A current reshaping of how women are viewed in Chilean society is that of the societal shifts in gender norms. Much of the oral histories collected opine that ‘women’s status as workers shaped female identity in ways that broke sharply with the rigid domesticity and sexual subordination of the previous generations’ (Tinsman, 1997). This reshaping of the gendered norm that requires women to perform within the role of the eternal subordinate was and continues to reshape norms and gender relations within a gender-divided labour market as well as society.

Another perspective, propounded by researcher Anna Bee, further proves the argument made by this article, regarding the current reshaping of norms, as Bee claims that – ‘[employment] does bring with it the potential for their empowerment [women] and the re-working of house-hold relations’ (Bee, 2000). As stated in the introduction, the increasing feminisation of this particular field of employment has yielded unbalanced but not entirely negative results due to certain aspects of Agri-employment being viewed as skilled, such as that of fruit packing – ‘women may be able to earn more than men...because they are concentrated in the most highly ‘skilled’ jobs such as packing delicate fresh fruit for export’ (Bee, 2000). This increases women’s bargaining power, reconfiguring the power dynamic between the genders and thus how they relate to each other. This reshaping manifests itself in a myriad of advantageous ways for women – increased control over the distribution of their earnings, increased decision-making/bargaining power and the possibility of saving pesos for their own needs (Tinsman, 1997). This essay would be remiss if it did not recognise that access to employment as well as employment associations/unions reshapes the male-employer versus female-subordinate power hierarchy, lending more power to temporeras (Bee, 2000).

The feminisation of Chile’s commercial Agri-sector serves to expose women to not only the workings of the global market but also to concept of unionisation and transnational social movements such as ‘La Vía Campesina’ (LVC). Though collective bargaining and union rights are still inhibited by Chilean labour laws, women’s contribution to campesina/o unions has only served to increase female visibility in the workforce and draw attention to the intersections between ethnicity, class, and employment from a female perspective. Not only does this reshape gender norms, the joining of forces between male workers unions and female workers unions reshapes gender relations, encouraging male recognition of the importance of female labour as well as the importance of coalition-building between Campesina and Campesino. LVC have challenged gender issues since its genesis in 1993 and have undertaken

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a hardline anti-transnational corporation stance (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010). As the neoliberal agenda continues to reconfigure itself due to the birth of new technologies, the same technologies play a vital role improving the quality of life for temporeras as well as utilising such technologies to garner attention for their cause i.e., social media. LVC has not only formed a new sense of identity for women and their means of employment; the movement recognises the intersections between rural ways of life and the commercialisation of campesina farming. LVC has created ‘an international peasant discourse and identity in tune with the times’ (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010). More recently, LVC has held yearly seminars on agroecology and holding an annual day of ‘Recognition for Peasant Struggles’ (LVC, 2019). LVC transcends gender in many ways, reshaping how the genders interact and relate to one another in the context of Chile, with both parties seeking recognition within the market for their labour rather than fighting for more floor space.

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the way the processes of globalisation have and continue to reinforce, disrupt, and reshape the processes gender norms and relations in Chile’s commercial agriculture, specifically in fruit production and exportation. Exploring the relationship between globalisation and gender within this context has yielded interesting and unbalanced results – as stated in the introduction. Continued studies on such a relationship are imperative to ameliorating our understanding of how globalisation effects women on micro as well as macro level both economically and socially. This article has proven that globalisation and neoliberalism can recalibrate how gender norms and relations are internalised and reproduced within a community, as seen in Chile and its gradual acceptance of women as market players worthy of the same respect as their male counterparts within the commercial Agri-sector. As Tinsman elucidates – ‘[In Chile] women came to challenge significant forms of male dominance...it sprang from the new meanings attached to women in their capacity as workers’ (Tinsman, 2004).

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