

Akemi Inamoto Orellana
PhD Student, Department of Geography, Syracuse University
CLAG Field Report

Gender and Environmental Governance among Rice Farmers in Tolima and Valle del Cauca,
Colombia

Project Summary

The rice farming sector in Colombia has undergone vast changes over the past 20 years. These changes are due to a wide array of factors, including rapidly changing biophysical conditions associated with climate change; increasing imports of low-cost, foreign-produced rice; and the reconfiguration of land tenure following decades of the armed conflict. Some of these changing environmental conditions include increasing variability in rainfall and temperature patterns, increased and prolonged occurrences of drought periods, and fluctuating solar radiation patterns, among others. In 2006, the government of Colombia signed a bilateral free-trade agreement with the US government, called the US-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA). Between 2012, when it first went into effect, and 2018 the rice sector was granted a grace period in which tariffs were maintained; since 2018, however, the tariffs have been gradually decreased, leading to a growth in the low-cost US-produced rice imports. In order to “defend themselves against the threats that surround them” (Fedearroz 2017, 10)—threats identified as climate change and the TPA—rice farmers have been advised by the National Rice Farmers Federation (Fedearroz for its Spanish acronym) to increase mechanization and adopt climate-smart agricultural (CSA) practices.

With growing imports of low-cost rice and manifestations of climate change, small and medium holder rice farmers find themselves in increasingly precarious positions, often abandoning farming altogether and/or participating in other income-generating activities. These changing circumstances have created space for the redefinition of gender norms in these communities, and, simultaneously, changes in environmental governance processes and structures. Drawing from the feminist political ecology framework, my dissertation research explores the gendered impacts of these transformative processes, with special focus on land and water governance in two rice farming regions of Colombia.

With the CLAG Field Study Award I was able to visit Colombia this summer to begin the first phase of my dissertation research. Between the months of June and August of 2019, I was

able to engage in participant observation, conduct semi-structured interviews, workshops, and focus groups, as well as connect with local water and land governance institutions in the departments of Tolima and Valle del Cauca. Research participants included women and men farmers, extension agents, government officials at the environment/sustainability and the agricultural development ministries, irrigation district representatives, and local researchers. During this time, I was also able to access land tenure and water user data through government officials and irrigation districts. During this fieldwork phase, I focused on establishing connections with local entities and researchers, as well as working with irrigation districts and Fedearroz to analyze some of their own data (such as land tenure, water users, and productivity data).

Following this summer's research, I became interested in carrying out a comparative study analyzing two rice farming regions in Colombia with differing environmental governance structures. The study sites (3 municipalities) in the department of Tolima count with formal, organized irrigation districts with infrastructure built during the 1950s; while some land in this region was (re)distributed through agrarian reform, most land ownership has been determined through private purchase and sale in the land market. The study sites (2 municipalities) in the department of Valle del Cauca, on the other hand, do not have a formal irrigation district, but rather manage irrigation canals communally and with the assistance of the local rice mill; land in this region was distributed primarily through agrarian reform in the 1970s, distributing 4.2 hectares of land to individual families. In addition to the diverging political ecologies of environmental governance, the ethnic and racial contexts, and cultures, are also different. Most farmers in Tolima identify as mestizo, whereas most farmers in Valle del Cauca identify as indigenous and/or afro-Colombian.

Access to water and land as well as the participation of women farmers in the land and water governance structures appeared to vary in both research sites. For example, in Valle del Cauca, where there is no formally organized irrigation district, more women appear to be involved in the communal management of the informal irrigation district. I was able to interview the current vicepresident of the La Berta Ministrito de Riego, who also spoke about other women's involvement in the management and maintenance of the canals over the past twenty years. In Tolima, however, although the irrigation districts have been set up since the 1950s, only three women have participated in management positions at the irrigation districts (called *junta*

directiva in the study sites). Regarding land, preliminary data analysis demonstrates that land tenure has indeed changed over the past 20 years (the digital records only go back so far), with women ownership increasing over this time period. Whereas prior to twenty years ago the land in Tolima was disproportionately owned by men (closer to 70% owned by men), current records show that nearly 50% of the land irrigated by the irrigation districts participating in this research are owned by women.

For this dissertation research I am collaborating with local researchers at Fedearroz, who serve as the farmers' representative to the national government and carry out research and development for rice farming in Colombia. It is primarily through this collaboration that I have been able to connect with participants in the communities where I do research. In addition to supporting my dissertation, I also aim to utilize this research to assist Fedearroz in developing gender-transformative policy that will support women rice farmers in Colombia, a goal sought by Fedearroz.

Thanks to the CLAG grant I was able to complete this first round of my dissertation research and achieve my goals for the summer. The work completed during this summer will also be used to develop other external grant proposals to support my long-term fieldwork, and dissertation. ¡Gracias CLAG!



Photo 1: Women and men farmworkers transplanting in La Berta, Valle del Cauca (Photo by Akemi Inamoto)



Photo 2: Farmers participating in land water governance workshop at Fedearroz research station led by myself in Saldaña, Tolima (Photo by Akemi Inamoto)