**////Title: The Use of Communal Land by Rural Women in Mexico**

**////Stand-first**:

The inability to access land is a major cause of poverty in agricultural societies. Women, who are less likely to own, rent, buy or inherit land, are particularly affected and access to communal land may provide a vital lifeline. Dr Jozelin María Soto-Alarcón [Jozelin mɑríə ˈsoʊtoʊ Alarcóɛn] and Dr Diana Xóchitl González-Gómez [daɪˈænə ɛksóchitl González ʤiómɛz] set out to investigate the use of communal land in a rural community in Mexico, investigating the strategies used by a collective of women to achieve access to this critical resource.

**////Body text:**

Land is an essential resource for peasants living in rural areas of the world. Mexico represents an interesting example in this regard as 52% of agricultural land is in communal use. Access to this resource is regulated by Federal Agrarian Law. This forward-looking regulation aimed to establish equal access for men and women and encourage female participation in land-based economic activity.

For example, the best areas of agricultural land around major urban areas were earmarked for use by Women Agro-Industrial Units, female-led agricultural collectives established for agricultural activities. However, subsequent regulation, historical attitudes that see men as breadwinners, and economic conditions mean that land is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the most privileged producers.

The statistics are striking. While the law stipulates that 40% of individuals involved in the management of communal land must be women, the latest figures show that only 7.9 % of agricultural collectives are run by women. The lack of land ownership, the small proportion of women working in paid roles in agriculture, and gender stereotypes mean that women need to resort to collective bargaining strategies to ensure access to resources.

While aspects of land use by individual women have been extensively studied, communal bargaining strategies to ensure access received little attention in the past. Dr Jozelin María Soto-Alarcón and Dr Diana Xóchitl González-Gómez from the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo [həˈdælˌgoʊ steɪt ˌjunəˈvɜrsəti] conducted a case study to investigate the dynamics of this bargaining process.

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To carry out their work, the scientists regularly visited a rural community in Hidalgo and, hosted by four local families, spent significant amounts of time with the women and the community, participating in daily activities, including prayers. Apart from building trust with the community, this close contact provided the scientists with critical insight into family and community dynamics.

To conduct their study, the scientists utilised a variety of methodologies. For example, the women’s collective produced medicinal products from plants that often grew in the wild. To understand the background affecting the activities of the cooperative, the scientists needed data on the gathering places, scarcity, and use of these plants. This information was gathered through environmental studies.

To understand interactions between the women, their families, the wider community, and the regional legislation, personal observations were carried out. Staying with the families gave the researchers unprecedented insight into some of the interactions that could not have been elicited otherwise.

In addition, regular focus group discussions, involving all members of the cooperative, explored the challenges facing the women and their possible solutions. Finally, community authority interviews were used to elicit the views of officials – two men who had control over some of the resources the cooperative needed.

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Farming in the Hidalgo region almost exclusively produces oregano for sale. Due to the economic importance of this crop, almost all agricultural land is allocated exclusively for this purpose. The economic importance of oregano cultivation is so strong that two female members of the cooperative who own agricultural land themselves use this for oregano production, rather than for the benefit of the women’s collective. As such, the resources needed for the functioning and survival of the cooperative are negotiated against this backdrop.

This situation puts severe constraints on women’s economic activities. They need to use otherwise uncultivated land and produce alternative products with sufficiently high financial or community values to make their activity viable. One important example of this is the production of herbs. Given the lack of access to medical care in the community (the nearest medical facility is only accessible after a 3-hour bus journey), the production of medicinal products is a strong determinant in the bargaining process.

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As the focus group discussions revealed, bargaining by the women took place at three levels. The first issue was ensuring access to physical resources needed for the functioning of the cooperative. As Dr Soto-Alarcón and Dr González-Gómez observed, securing land was only a small part of the negotiations. Most of the medicinal herbs used by the cooperative were historically foraged in the natural environment. Doing so in Mexico requires legal permits or consent from landowners. Due to the medicinal value of their products the women’s collective in Hidalgo was able to negotiate access to communal land with local authorities. In addition, they paid private landowners a fee to use their land for foraging.

Members of the cooperative also obtained some communal and family land for the cultivation of the wild plants through the support of their families, primarily in areas unsuitable for oregano production. Finally, after years of negotiations with the local authorities, and free labour from their families, the women built a workshop, ‘Medicine House’, where they process the harvested plants.

The second resource needed is the expert knowledge on how to care for, and potentially cultivate wild plants, including information on the harvesting and processing of their produce. While some information is passed down through generations, the cooperative arranged advice and support from non-governmental organisations on the propagation and processing of wild plants.

The third resource for the success of the cooperative is social support. The women provide medical care for the local community, reinforcing social norms placing women in a caring role. Although this allows members of the cooperative to negotiate continuous access to communal land where they grow or collect the plants, not everybody in the community is sympathetic. During their observations, Dr Soto-Alarcón and Dr González-Gómez recorded events of hostility towards the activities of the cooperative both from family and neighbours.

The scientists also noted the extra burden associated with this activity. Women look after their plants, manufacture their medicinal products, and provide healthcare while also working on the family land and in the home. Often, they are the first ones to rise and the last ones to go to bed. Despite these strains, the women valued the improved status provided by their ability to contribute to the survival of their families through participation in the cooperative. Many of them mentioned concerns about the long-term survival of the cooperative, providing the same opportunities for future generations.

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This case study by Dr Soto-Alarcón and Dr González-Gómez records previously undocumented aspects of social interactions in a rural Mexican community. The study highlights the caring role of the women in threw their interactions with the community and the natural world, in this case, their plants. It highlights the reinforcement of social norms placing women in caring roles and the extra burden these roles cause.

The scientists hope that this study will inform the shaping of future governmental strategies to provide equitable access to land and other resources. Their work clearly points to the need for novel strategies providing local, sustainable livelihoods for women living in rural communities.

This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘Collective Rural Women Access, Use, and Control Over Communal Land in Mexico: A Post-capitalist Feminist Political Ecology Approach’, published in the open access journal *Frontiers*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2021.695344

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