

Women's Hands Are All Over Brazil's Booming Agribusiness

Written by Isaura Daniel
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In Rondonópolis, in the interior of Mato Grosso state, in Brazil, a woman called Cristiane Rabaioli is responsible for processing the meat of 1,200 lamb and 3,000 heads of cattle a month. In the city of São João da Boa Vista, São Paulo state, Sílvia Morgulis produces oranges, rubber and corn and raises cattle on six farms. In Londrina, Paraná, Mariângela Hungria creates solutions for nutrition of the soil for soy and bean crops, and in Piracicaba, in the state of São Paulo, Julia Martella de Almeida, studies to follow a similar route as that of these three women: agribusiness.

Rabaioli, Morgulis, Hungria and even Elisandra Rosa Rodrigues, a small scale farmer in Nova Resende, Minas Gerais, are some of the Brazilian women who found their place in a professional universe that was traditionally male. Their greater presence in crops, agricultural research laboratories, pesticide industries or slaughterhouses are the consequence of change in Brazilian agribusiness itself, more modern and less manual.

"The use of technology has opened new fronts, and it is currently not necessary to have physical strength to work in agribusiness, and there are new areas and new technologies," said Rabaioli, the executive director at Estância Celeiro.

Added to that, agribusiness is one of the sectors that has been generating dividends to the country, which attracts men and women seeking placement. "The area is booming in Brazil," said head hunter Renata Bezerra, the owner of consultancy Agritalents, in Ribeirão Preto, in the interior of São Paulo.

Agritalents is specialized in recruitment of professionals for agribusiness and, according to Bezerra, half of the candidates to posts are women. Companies rarely demand that the hired employee be a man. "Except when the professional is going to lead a group of men," she said.

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This more mixed sex agribusiness is also reflected in the academic world. At the Agronomic Engineering course of the Luiz de Queiroz Higher Education School (Esalq) of the University of São Paulo (USP), in Piracicaba, one of the most renowned in the area in Brazil, of the 196 students enrolled this year, 70 were women, which corresponds to 36% of all.

Some 11 years ago, there were 30%, or 54 enrolments in a total of 180. "Women are, more and more, occupying space with competence and efficiency. This also takes place in Agronomic engineering. The profession is broad, allowing women to participate in all areas of hiring," said the course coordinator, José Otávio Menten.

Despite the openness of the rural world to women, almost all of those who opened the professional gates of agribusiness did not only gain grace in terms of the position held. Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa) researcher Mariângela Hungria entered the Soy unit in 1991, where she studies nitrogen fixing in the soil through the use of bacteria.

"Some said: it is good for her to stay in the laboratory with the animals, it is very feminine," recalled Hungria, laughing. She is currently a reference in research in the area. "When you are starting, you hear many things, then you prove that you are competent, and respect prevails," she said.

A similar situation was reported by Rabaioli, regarding her first days as a zootechnician in Rondonópolis. "I graduated in zootechny in 1998 and when I returned to Rondonópolis there was only one other zootechnician apart from me. I suffered much bias and people said I had no strength," explained the executive, who studied in Minas Gerais.

Elisângela Rosa Rodrigues also said that she faced lack of faith regarding her work when she was sworn in as president of the Nova Resende Farmer Union. "Many had no faith as I am a woman. That is why I now refuse to leave [the post]," said Rodrigues. Silvia Morgulis' father, for example, did not want her to take over the farm as soon as she became a vet.

Be it with no specific training, as is the case with Rodrigues, who only completed secondary school, or with postdoctorates, as is the case with Hungria and Morgulis, many of the stories of

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women in agribusiness are of transformation. Morgulis leads the female agribusiness nucleus at the Brazilian Rural Society (SRB) and deals with many female farmers, mainly in livestock.

"They are open to innovation, not bringing taboos, and they accept consultancy more easily, being greatly concerned with management," she said. Among the stories of change heard, none come from women who sat at the gate staring at the cattle.

Morgulis, despite having graduated in veterinary medicine from USP, only took over the family farms once she had a masters, doctorate and postdoctorate in the areas of Comparative Pathology and Pharmacology.

"My father did not think it was an appropriate activity, feeling it was a second rate area, thinking that we should not depend on property, but on work," said the farmer.

Some ten years ago, however, at the age of 70, her father decided to let his daughter take care of the bureaucracy involving the raising of Guzerat cattle. And Morgulis showed that it was possible to work on the farm and make that a respectable profession.

Up to then, farms were not considered a true business by the family. The first thing done by Morgulis was to sort out the team. "There were employees, but no team," she said. That was when the vet, with all her academic experience, hired the right people, and then went to the paddocks to accompany weaning and cattle branding.

For animal breeding, she found a more profitable niche than meat, namely the sale of animals for reproduction, and for the oranges, she found a market that was less affected by the crisis: fertilizer supply. She established partnerships and learn that management is the key to success. "Margins are narrow and you have to be very efficient," she said.

More Meat

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Rabaioli, in Rondonópolis, also found new bearings for Estância Celeiro when she took the helm as executive director. The company, a sheep slaughterhouse, became a meat processing plant, not just lamb, but also beef, specializing in special cuts.

"We outsourced slaughter three years ago," says the director, regarding the initiative that was aimed at increasing production and company profitability. Six years ago, when Rabaioli was still a company consultant, two employees worked at the site and 60 lamb were slaughtered a month. Today, the team has 170 employees and 1,200 sheep and 2,000 bovines are processed a month.

Rabaioli graduated in zootechny, is postgraduated in Ruminants and has a master's degree in Tropical Agriculture, but she found her calling in agribusiness management. So much so that after entering Estância Celeiro, she got an MBA in Business Management from Getúlio Vargas Foundation.

"Thrice a week I go to the unit and talk to employees, have a weekly meeting with the financial department and administrative manager. My office door is always open. Every day I speak to HR, which I consider one of the greatest areas in our company," says the zootechnician.

Rabaioli, whose father is a cattle farmer whom she helps in his business, says she is certain that she does what she loves.

Hungria, a researcher at Embrapa Soy, defined the route she wanted to trail as a kid, motivated by her grandmother, a science teacher. Her grandmother developed experiments in her yard and invited her granddaughter to participate.

"At age eight, she gave me the book 'Microbe Hunters', with the story of great microbiologists," she said. There, Hungria learnt that she wanted to work in research. "I studied agronomy thinking about research," she said.

At school, the top student in her class, nobody believed she would decide against medicine and go study agronomy. Then, from internship to internship, Hungria finished graduation and her

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masters at Esalq/USP, in Piracicaba, and then went on to her doctorate at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Her starting at Embrapa was at the same time.

The agronomist got a postdoctorate in the United States, but decided to return to Brazil, to the Embrapa unit in Londrina, motivated by the possibility of developing her own research and providing quality of life to her two small daughters.

"We were the first country to prove that re-inoculation increases annual revenues per plant by 8%," said Cunha.

Inoculation is the process through which a bacterium is inserted during sowing, with the seed. It helps fix nitrogen in the soil and with this, less is spent on nitrogenous fertilizers, which are pollutant. "The economy brought to soy alone is R\$ 20 billion (US\$ 10 billion) a year," she says.

The bacterium identified by the researcher and her team is appropriate for the cultivation of leguminous plants, like soy and beans. She also identified bacteria for inoculation that helps in growth of plants in general and in absorption of water, making plants more tolerant to droughts.

She now leads in genome studies in nitrogen fixing bacteria. The award-winning agronomist also teaches microbiology and biotechnology in the post graduate course at the University of Londrina, and has already sponsored over 50 masters and doctors.

No Titles

On the other end, with no titles, Elisângela Rodrigues Rosa also works for Brazilian agribusiness. A daughter of farmers, she married a farmer and started helping him in corn, soy, coffee, bean and rice cultivation.

"For the last two years, we have only been cultivating coffee. But now the coffee market is also not good," she said. At the couple's property, it has always been Rosa who manages the

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bureaucracy.

"But I also help in crops," she says. Around a year and a half ago, on noticing that the rural union in her city operated little and farmers living hard times, she decided to take on the presidency of the organization.

"When I got there, there were two chairs, two printers, two computers, no desk and no roof," she said. Between six and eight courses were offered to farmers each year. Today the organization already has a piece of land on which to build its headquarters, a car and offered 52 training courses last year.

"I noticed that union between farmers was lacking. I felt the need to have knowledge and pass it on. So I joined the union," she explained. A mother of two daughters, apart from managing the union, she also helps take care of the house and coordinate groups in the Catholic Church.

Julia Martella de Almeida, aged 20, is getting ready to become an entrepreneur in agribusiness. A student in the fourth year of Agronomical Engineering at Esalq/USP, she plans to work in floriculture. Part of the new generation of women in agribusiness, Almeida is the daughter of an agronomical engineer who works with beef cattle and flower culture at a farm in Lins, in the interior of the state of São Paulo.

"When I was a little girl, I went to the greenhouses, I would put earth in pots," she recalls, regarding her taste for the things of the country. Before setting up the business in floriculture, however, the youth plans to study abroad and learn about technology applied to the area in nations that are references in the sector.

The coordinator of the Agronomical Engineering course at Esalq/USP, José Otávio Machado Menten, who relates to students of both sexes every day, points out the talent of women in learning. "Women are more focused and dedicated. Academic development has been greater than that of men. There is ease to develop activities like planning, research, studies, laboratories and communication, etc. There are also some biased farmers who resist being guided by women, but that is also dropping," said Menten.

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Bezerra, from Agritalents, stated that the sectors that most hired women in agribusiness, through his consultancy company, are companies in the area of finance, research and laboratories. Agritalents selects professionals in the area to work all over the country, but the main focus is the sugar and alcohol sector.

According to her, one of the hardships for hiring people for posts is mobility, moving to another city to face a new job. "When single, it is easier," he said. Women, however, said Bezerra, are in all areas of agribusiness, including operating harvesters and driving trucks.

Anba