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Rural Masculinities in Tension: Barriers to Climate Change Adaptation in Nicaragua

Many regions affected by climate change are located in the Global South, where rural livelihoods depend on rainfall. For the rural poor in these regions, adapting to climate change means living off the land while coping with increasingly frequent droughts and floods. To support these populations, governmental and nongovernmental organizations are deploying adaptation projects aimed at enhancing rural populations' capacities to cope with rapidly changing environmental conditions. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the scientific authority in the field, has recently acknowledged that not only do climate change impacts, such as floods and droughts, have different effects on women and men, but that adaptation projects may also reinforce the gender norms of a given society (IPCC 2014). Understanding how climate change affects gender relations is especially necessary in countries in the Global South, where the urgency of climate change adaptation overshadows other issues that should be priorities: among them, the need to tackle gender inequality. But climate change policy makers often see social injustices as less urgent than addressing the planetary crisis; this has been partly attributable to a lack of research on the gender, race, and class dimensions of climate change. In the majority of cases in which the nexus between gender and climate change *has* been investigated, the focus has been on women. There is almost no research on how climate change affects men or how the aims of climate change adaptation projects align or clash with masculine values and identities.

This essay begins to fill that gap by focusing on a specific climate change adaptation project implemented by an NGO in rural Nicaragua. I focus on the ways in which rural masculinities influence how the project is being received by its intended participants: the mostly male cattle-ranching population. My intention is to draw the attention of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners to the fact that masculinities matter when it comes to implementing climate change adaptation projects. I show that it is important to analyze the discursive and cultural constructions of hegemonic masculinities that shape the way climate change is addressed on the one hand, and how the "subjects" of climate change adaptation interventions sometimes reproduce hegemonic gender identities on the other. Indeed, masculinities come with internalized norms in rural

Nicaragua, a country where, as in many places in Latin America, macho culture is omnipresent. Among these norms is the fact that being a cattle rancher is tantamount to being a "real man." In particular, I discuss why some men refuse to implement project activities when their gendered subjectivities as cattle ranchers are threatened.

Blaming Smallholder Farmers for the Changing Climate

In 2014, I conducted ethnographic field research in El Pijibay, a rural community in the municipality of El Rama, in the region of the South Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. Through interviews with NGO workers and 34 Pijibay inhabitants (20 men and 14 women), I learned about a climate change adaptation project that is one of many Nicaraguan initiatives promoting cocoa production. Related to the Nicaraguan government's 2013 climate change adaptation strategy, the project encourages cattle ranchers to switch to cocoa production as a means of adapting to shorter rainy seasons. Replacing cattle ranching with cocoa farming is seen as a way to mitigate climate change by preventing deforestation. Unlike ranching, which leads to forest clearing to make pasture, cocoa production requires planting trees that help maintain soil fertility and humidity. Indeed, cocoa production is presented nationwide as part of the solution to the crises in the coffee and livestock sectors—crises that are attributed to climate change effects, such as increased droughts and irregular rain patterns (Zelaya 2014). Additionally, the initiatives present cocoa production as a means of stopping the advancement of the agricultural frontier: by settling in one place to grow cocoa, farmers no longer need to move towards the eastern parts of the country that are still forested, in search of new lands and pastures for their livestock.

The project was designed to give small- and medium-scale cattle ranchers—a total of 40 families—the means to convert to cocoa production, such as training, plants, and tools. The NGO's rationale for promoting the cocoa project was that small- and medium-scale cattle ranchers in El Pijibay were responsible for deforestation in the community, and it was therefore up to them to do something about it: reforestation through planting cocoa. This accusatory narrative is characteristic of the dominant message conveyed by climate change projects. For example, the United Nations Development Program's 2014 communication campaign on climate change, broadcast on the radio, featured two popular Nicaraguan cabaret figures posing as smallholder

farmers who ask each other how they should adapt to the changing climate. Part of the answer is: "It's simple! By harvesting rainwater. By saving water. We must not burn or cut trees. Rather, we have to plant trees." Scapegoating local farmers for destroying forests is an indication that climate change adaptation projects do not seek to tackle environmental injustices. The main drivers of deforestation in El Pijibay are the illegal timber trade and land grabbing for palm oil plantations, both of which are enabled by economically and politically powerful nonindigenous elite families whose activities contribute to reinforcing the capitalist system. As one of the ranchers informally shared with me, it is ironic that smallholders are blamed for cutting down a hectare of forests per year, when palm oil plantations have cleared entire communities in the region in the last five years (paraphrase from field notes, 2014). Thus, scapegoating local smallholder farmers for degrading the natural environment, and labeling their environmental and agricultural practices as "maladapted" takes attention away from environmental injustices in a highly polarized, neoliberal—and patriarchal—society.

Changing Weather, Resisting Masculinities

In contrast to the NGO staff tasked with running the cocoa project, the inhabitants of El Pijibay do not worry about climate change or the community's rapid deforestation. At a workshop in El Pijibay in 2014, only 2 out of 18 participants, both of them men over 40, mentioned changes in the local environmental conditions as important changes in their lives and environment over the last 10 years. Nobody mentioned the fact that the forest cover has significantly diminished in the surrounding area. Instead of talking about the negative effects of their cattle-ranching activities on the forest cover, it was the externally imposed "obligation" to implement reforestation that appeared to be a burden: they could no longer cut down trees without a project telling them that they needed to plant new ones. This "obligation" to contribute to reforestation was mentioned by 12 of the 18 participants, 9 of them men.

My research showed that the men involved in the project played nice outwardly, but did not give cocoa prominence either on their agricultural plots or in the time they dedicated to its production. This contradiction can be understood through the lens of *resistant masculinities*. Indeed, the project challenged traditional gender roles in that it took away symbolic masculine power from men by prompting them to produce

cocoa instead of cattle. Recalling Campbell's (2006) study of masculinities in New Zealand in their own work on the effects of drought in Australia, Alston and Kent write: "[The] destabilization of traditional, hierarchical, gender roles challenges traditional normative rural masculinity and is resisted in various ways by men" (2008, 137). When looking at Nicaraguan farmers' behavior through this lens, we see that male cattle ranchers refuse to execute climate change adaptation activities because they want to preserve practices that maintain local hegemonic masculinities, despite the fact that these practices are environmentally destructive.

The climate-change-related threats to cattle ranching, along with changes ostensibly required for adaptation, appeared to be threats to local cattle ranchers' masculine sense of self, according to my study. This was reinforced by the fact that the NGO's cocoa project mainly targeted men: in El Pijibay, only men were directly involved in the project. The way smallholder cattle ranchers rationalized the project illustrated the desire of men to increase their cattle herds. When I asked the beneficiaries what they would do if they generated a significant income through cocoa production (which was not yet the case), they answered that they would use the money to buy more cattle. Some added that they found it convenient that they could plant cocoa on plots not well suited for pastures and therefore "did not mind converting" to cocoa, *as long as* it did not compete with cattle ranching. Of course, this was not in accordance with the NGO project's objective to bring about the progressive abandonment of cattle ranching. The farmers' comments suggested that when they decided not to convert to cocoa, it was not just driven by the fact that cattle ranching still generates more economic gains than cocoa production; it highlighted the importance of the social status afforded to men by cattle ranching in the Nicaraguan social imaginary, over potential economic gains (Flores and Torres 2012).

Local Arrangements to Maintain Hegemonic Masculinities

There was a direct relationship between the number of cows grazing on a man's pastures and his social status. Indeed, all my male interviewees shared the wish to increase their livestock. To that end, arrangements were implemented between large-scale cattle ranchers who owned many cows but who lacked pastures, and smallholders who did not have animals but had land. For smallholders and medium-holders, it did

Figure 1: Smallholder cattle rancher milking a cow (courtesy of the author).

not matter if the animals belonged to them or not; the important thing was having the animals graze on their own pastures. It did not matter to large-holders whether the animals were grazing on their own pastures (they usually did not live on their farms anyway); the important thing was to own the greater number of animals. Both sides saw these arrangements as advantageous when it came to increasing men's social status. To be considered a "real man," a rancher needed to have as many cows as possible, no matter if this entailed deforestation in the short term.

Interestingly, while class differences are usually evident in Nicaraguan rural society, they were erased when it came to developing practices that reinforced rural masculinities. The masculinities of both large-scale ranchers who owned hundreds of cows and subsistence-level farmers who could afford just a few animals depended on the number of animals they had. Large-holders and smallholders needed to unite their efforts to reach their respective objectives. The difference was that smallholders destroyed their last remaining plots in order to raise these animals, while large-holders could afford to increase their status without needing to find new territories to set up pasture—and, thus, without being blamed for deforestation that contributes to climate change.

Lessons for Climate Change Adaptation Policy Makers and Practitioners

My study shows that the intersection of patriarchy, hegemonic rural masculinities, and climate change is destructive to the environment and, if ignored by climate change adaptation practitioners, can result in failed projects. No matter how important it is for climate change, practitioners and policy makers need to understand that challenging the role of male cattle ranchers—be it by decreasing pasture availability or through NGO actions—can threaten their sense of self and macho identity, which in turn motivates their resistance to adaptation activities. This resistance may be hard to detect, especially since farmers are ambivalent (Butler 1997) towards these initiatives. For example, though male cattle ranchers in El Pijibay resent adaptation initiatives, they still comply with expectations to take part in project activities, which may push them into leadership roles.

Policy makers should be aware that hegemonic masculinities reproduce under many conditions, even under the effects of climate change. Yet as noted by Connell and Messerschmidt, "gender relations are always arenas of tension" (2005, 853). As such, the dominant patterns of masculinity that become hegemonic in certain conditions may be destabilized, and hence open to challenge as these conditions change—in this case, as rainfall patterns change and disrupt established climatic conditions, and with them the gendered social relations of agriculture. The point is to detect how socioenvironmental transformations can come about under new conditions: i.e., how climate change can be conducive to the democratization of gender relations and to more sustainable production systems. Practitioners, social and environmental movements, and researchers may have an important role to play in triggering these changes through appropriate interventions that are sensitive to local gender dynamics. They may start, for example, by identifying the "champions" of adaptation initiatives by detecting the rare and exceptional cases in which men do abandon cattle ranching for cocoa production.

Conclusion

The climate change adaptation project described here intends to destabilize what Campbell (2006) calls "traditional normative rural masculinity"—an intention resisted by men. According to my case study, unsustainable cattle-ranching practices do not persist because of their disastrous environmental outcomes or their unsatisfying long-

term economic results; unsustainable cattle-ranching persists because it mobilizes existing, naturalized gender roles (Carr 2008). Hence, aspiring to reproduce masculinities and the macho culture—which in this case is related to the cultural significance of cattle ranching—determines why particular climate change adaptation measures are not adopted and why certain types of masculinities are reinforced. This is an important—yet largely ignored—issue in climate change research. Projects may fail to reach their objectives because men refuse to do what they are told in an effort to preserve their masculine social status. It is also important because ignoring how masculinities can influence rural populations' responses to climate change projects may contribute to reinforcing existing inequalities and their intersection with environmental degradation, which can become a vicious circle. In the case of the cocoa project in El Pijibay, male smallholder cattle ranchers who have been made vulnerable by climate change may become even more vulnerable because the NGO's blame narrative ignores their cultural conditions and misplaces the responsibility for deforestation. Perhaps, more importantly, this narrative fails to open up new spaces for desperately needed socio-environmental transformations.

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