Strong, Young, Male, Foreign Bodies at Work: Paraguayan Inequality in Argentina's Farm Forestry

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Abstract: This paper examines the juxtaposition of inequalities in the forestry labor market in the delta of the Paraná River in Argentina. Forestry has traditionally been one of the most masculine rural activities. In the area under study, most of the farmers are men. Workers are also men, but there is a hierarchy among them: managers and machine operators are locals and higher up in the social structure; at the lowest rank of the ladder, one would find chainsaw operators and those who do manual work. The latter are mainly Paraguayan migrants. These migrants are appreciated for their strength, but they suffer the impacts of extremely harsh working and living conditions. The stereotype of the "good Paraguayan forestry worker," which is also part of their own ethnic pride, catalyzes and is the result of the three types of inequalities: vital, existential, and material. Based on the analysis of ethnographic records of in-depth interviews and participant observations conducted by the author's research team between 2012 and 2019, this paper characterizes macro-structural conditions related to secondary labor market theory and considers some mesostructural features. It argues that the combination of recruitment strategies and naturalization ideology of Paraguayan masculinity helps explain Paraguayan workers' inequalities. According to the local common sense, their inequality and harsh life stem from indigenous-foreign origin and eagerness to fulfill masculine mandates. At the microstructural level, the article analyzes their aspirations, which do not necessarily confront domination and are part of adaptive preferences that normalize inequalities.

Keywords: inequality, forestry work, migrant workers, racialization, masculinities, naturalization, Paraguay, Argentina

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Introduction

In some rural industries, such as forestry, migrant workers are the majority in manual, low-paid, low-skilled jobs. The companies engaged in this field rely on access to pools of cheap, flexible, and docile migrant labor.[1] The delta of the Paraná River has become one of the most important forestry areas in Argentina, providing willow and poplar wood for the pulp, paper, pellet, and furniture industries.

The expansion of forestry in the region over the last fifty years resulted from the recruitment and employment of migrant laborers for forestry work, particularly planting, harvesting, thinning, pruning, and herbicide spraying. Initially, these workers came from other Argentine provinces. Since the 1990s, the hiring of young Paraguayans has, among other things, favored the capitalization of a small group of forestry farmers and helped those who could not afford such capitalization to persist in the forestry system.[2] These workers are highly valued locally for their effectiveness and efficiency, similar to the Mexican workers in the Bracero Program in the US.[3]

By the beginning of the 21st century, there were three types of forestry enterprises: medium capitalized farmers, capitalized farmers, and timber industries. The first type, medium capitalized farmers, owned between 300 and 1,000 hectares. Most of them were proprietors or had their enterprises on state lands. They managed their farms with a family logic and most of the workers were family members. They hired Paraguayans through informal contracts offering very low wages, which had helped capitalization to some extent. These farmers sold their production mainly to capitalized farmers and timber industries. They could hardly make profits.

The second type of forestry enterprise, capitalized farmers, often owned more than 1,000 hectares. They managed their farms with a business logic. They hired salaried wage labor. Paraguayans were frequently hired in the lowest labor positions with legal contracts. These farmers used the latest technology. They sold their production to timber industries or used it in their own sawmills and factories. They often increased their business capital.

The third type of forestry enterprise, timber industries, were owned by extra-local economic groups (of national or international capitals). They owned a huge amount of land and had a business logic from the beginning (as opposed to the capitalized farmers

[1] Rye and O'Reilly 2022.
[2] Pizarro, 2016.
[3] Be Ramírez and Salinas Boldo, 2019.

who changed from family to business logic in the last thirty years). They used the latest technology and hired workers legally. These workers used to be Paraguayan, but there were no more Paraguayan laborers during the time of our fieldwork (2012-2019). These industries used their production in their own sawmills and factories. They systematically increased their business capital.

Paraguayans constitute the largest migratory group in Argentina, followed by Bolivians and Peruvians. These regional migrations are part of the broader migratory system in the Southern Cone of South America, in which Argentina is the main receiving country.[4]

In Argentina, Paraguayans are concentrated in urban areas despite originally coming from rural peasant areas.[5] In cities, men work mainly in construction and women in domestic services. In 2022, the percentage of Paraguayan women in Argentina was slightly higher than that of men (53% of the total Paraguayan population). This number differs from that of 2010, when women represented 55.6% of the total Paraguayan population and feminization of the flow was observed by some scholars.[6] Construction and domestic services are gender and ethno-national segmented labor markets where Paraguayan men and women of indigenous descent, namely Guaraní people,[7] are stereotyped as the most suitable workers.[8]

Paraguayan migrants in the forestry labor market in the delta of the Paraná River contrast with these labor market trends. Young Paraguayan men have been working in the forestry industry in this rural area (located eighty kilometers from Buenos Aires, the country's capital) either on a seasonal or a temporary basis since the 1990s. Both the remarkable male preponderance (sex ratio of 83.5) and their insertion in the forestry labor market may be due to four reasons: the strength of migrants' social networks; their familiarity with rural areas, in terms of the landscape and the type of work; the lack of government control over their migratory status; and personal motivations.[9] As with construction and domestic services, forestry is a gender and ethno-nationally segmented

[4] Pizarro, Ortiz, and Straccia 2019.
[5] Pizarro 2017.
[6] Bruno 2013.
[7] In 2022, the Paraguayan population was approximately 6,110,000. A total of 140,206 (2.3% of the total population) belonged to 19 indigenous peoples. The largest group was the Mbyá Guaraní (27,835 people). It was one of the four groups that made up the Guaraní people who lived in rural areas in the eastern region of Paraguay. Many of them were part of the migration flow to Argentina.
[8] Bruno 2013; del Águila 2014; Pacceca and Courtis 2008; Vargas 2005.
[9] Pizarro, Ortiz, and Straccia 2019.

labor market, where the worker supply draws on strong and young Paraguayans who are eager to work in manual, low-paid, and low-skilled jobs.

This paper examines the juxtaposition of inequalities in the forestry labor market in the delta of the Paraná River. Forestry has traditionally been one of the most masculine activities in different rural areas of the world.[10] In the delta region as well, most of the farmers are men. They either own or rent the land where the forest is planted, and they manage the processes, from clearing the land to harvesting and selling the wood. Even though the workers are also men, there is a hierarchy among them: the managers and the machine operators are local, although some of the latter originate from other regions of Argentina; at the bottom of the ladder are the chainsaw operators, who are mainly Paraguayan migrants, as well as the workers who do the planting, thinning, pruning, and weeding on the farms.

Paraguayan workers are valued for their strength in this male-dominated forestry culture. But their bodies suffer from the effects of the extremely harsh working and living conditions, and by the time they reach their mid-twenties, they usually suffer from bone, muscle, and lung diseases. They usually start working in forestry at about eighteen years of age and do the hardest work. As time goes by, when they are in their mid-twenties, they seek other, less difficult tasks in the forest plantations. They may also look for jobs in sawmills, in breeding (on the islands), or in construction (on the mainland).

The stereotype of the "good Paraguayan forestry worker," which is also part of ethnic pride for the Paraguayans themselves, catalyzes and is the result of the three types of inequality: vital, existential, and material. According to Göran Therborn, vital inequality refers to the unbalanced distribution of health and mortality rates across social classes, existential inequality is the denial of equal recognition and respect, and material inequality is unequal access to social capital and rewards.[11]

In this chapter, the macrostructural conditions of this labor market with reference to the second labor market theory are characterized.[12] Also considered are some mesostructural features, such as recruitment strategies and presuppositions that naturalize the exploitation of workers by appealing to racialization and masculine mandates. At the microstructural level, Paraguayan workers' aspirations, which are

[10] Brandth and Haugen 1998.
[11] Therborn 2012.
[12] Pries 1997.

forged over time and tempered by the experiences of those who have gone before or by their own hopes and dreams and do not necessarily confront their exploitation, are taken into account. In many cases, even when working and living conditions are not as expected, workers accommodate and normalize the situation in which they find themselves.[13]

According to Sen's capabilities approach, there is a difficulty in assessing well-being from a subjective point of view. He remarks that people can internalize the harshness of their circumstances so that they do not desire what they can never expect to achieve. This phenomenon of adaptive preferences can explain the fact that the Paraguayan workers we spoke with never tried to challenge their employers or recruiters concerning vital, existential, or material inequalities.[14]

Methodology

This paper is based on the analysis of ethnographic records of in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted between 2012 and 2019 by a research team convened by the author. The team initially consisted of a group of six undergraduate students (three female and three male) from the School of Agriculture (University of Buenos Aires) and five students from Florida Golf Coast University. These students took a course entitled "Agriculture and Wetlands in Argentina: Environmental Impacts of Agriculture and Forestry in Wetland Ecosystems" that was co-taught by the author and an expert in wetland ecology from the American university.

We visited several farmers in the area. Two months later, after the American students and professor had left, we returned to “the island”to greet the farmers and present to them the collective photograph that we had taken during our previous meeting.[15] Additionally, we provided them with a synthesis of the topics that we had discussed. The author believed that it would be fruitful to present a project to obtain funds to continue the research given that the students wished to write their final papers on these topics. Since that time, the University of Buenos Aires has granted us funds to

[13] O’Reilly and Rye 2022; Seiger et al. 2020.
[14] Watts 2009.
[15] Although the delta region is composed of numerous islands, local people refer to the region as "the island," expressing a profound sense of belonging to their place (Pizarro and Ortiz, 2019).

develop the research through three projects.[16] The National Council of Scientific and Technological Research finances another project.[17] The National Agency for Scientific and Technological Research has provided funding for research on Paraguayan and Bolivian migrations at the national level, which has enabled us to concentrate on the case of Paraguayans in the delta of the Paraná River.[18]

During this period, three professors joined the team for a limited duration, as did undergraduate and graduate students who conducted their theses on a topic relevant to our research objectives.[19] The proportion of women and men remained consistent, and the age of the students ranged from twenty to thirty-five years old.

Our team identified workers through snowballing within the networks of recruiters who managed employees' transfers to work on sites or at homes and had teams of workers in charge.[20] Each network had a nodal point in the same peasant area in Paraguay, and the recruiters called on their relatives, neighbors, and friends to go to "the island." Access outside of these networks was difficult because workers sometimes live on the farms and the landowners refused to consent to our interviews. In other cases, the workers themselves were reluctant for fear of losing their jobs and/or because they were suspicious of our motives.[21]

Our interview sample consisted of twenty-eight male Paraguayan workers born in Caazapá, an extremely impoverished department in Paraguay.[22] Most of our interlocutors were between twenty and thirty years of age, except for three who were around forty

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[16] 2014–2017: "We have created the delta." Discourses, practices, and knowledge about the relationship of society and nature with the dispute over the definition of the territory Forest Core Zone of the lower delta of the Paraná River.
2018–2023: Inhabiting, foresting, and conserving the wetland. Past and present controversies over the use and appropriation of the territory Forest Core Zone, lower delta of the Paraná River.
2023–2025: Inhabiting "the island": Life strategies and landscape assessments in the context of environmental conflicts in the lower delta of the Paraná River.

[17] 2022–2024: The river and the islands of the delta of the Paraná River. Inhabiting disputed environmental territories in transformation.

[18] 2016–2023: Trajectories and migratory experiences of Bolivian and Paraguayan workers in peri-urban and rural areas of Argentina.

[19] Four graduate theses, six master theses, and two PhD theses.

[20] Snowball sampling is effective in studies of "difficult-to-find" populations, especially migrant workers. McDaniel and Casanova (2003) posed the same difficulties when interviewing Mexican workers in the US forestry industry.

[21] Tollefsen et al. (2022) were aware of these feelings when they studied the case of berry pickers in Sweden. They say that workers are in insecure situations and are exposed to unpredictable risks.

[22] Brodbeck, Bailey, and Morse (2018) describe the rural areas in Guatemala where migrant H-2B workers in the US forestry industry come from. There are very limited livelihood opportunities in the local economy, like those in Caazapá. Most of the Guatemalan workers interviewed had a background in subsistence agriculture combined with seasonal farm labor on larger commercial farms. The same can be said of the Paraguayans in the delta region.

years old. The elders had worked hard in the forestry industry when they were younger, and afterwards they were able to switch to other jobs that were less harmful to their health. They were all peasants who had barely finished elementary school. We also spoke to six Paraguayan women who had come to "the island" with their husbands.

Much of the fieldwork was conducted by the research team and, on more than one occasion, by two or more researchers. An advantage that enhanced the interactions was that one of the researchers was Paraguayan and a speaker of Guaraní, one of the native (indigenous) languages in many Paraguayan rural areas. Interviews in Guaraní were translated into Spanish. Many of our interlocutors understood only a few words in Spanish and were only able to communicate in their native tongue.

We also spoke with many farmers and their families and joined them in different activities related to forestry and domestic life. Invitations to lunch or tea provided relaxed opportunities to talk informally.

Better Working and Living Conditions are Hard to Achieve

Dual market theory emphasizes the difference between primary and secondary labor markets based on job quality, wages, and working conditions.[23] Companies in the primary labor market offer better employment opportunities characterized by higher wages, job security, benefits, and worker protection. These jobs typically require more education, skills, or experience.

In contrast, companies grouped in the secondary labor market provide low-quality and low-status employment opportunities, low wages, substandard working conditions, and uncertain job security. Health hazards are also a common concern in these jobs characterized by a lack of opportunities for training and promotion, high employment instability, few benefits, and inadequate worker protection. These jobs frequently require only minimal education or skills and often entail part-time, temporary, or seasonal employment with contracts that typically rely on informal and personal connections between employers and employees. Consequently, workers have limited prospects for improving their circumstances or relocating to alternative work environments.

Dual market theory suggests that the labor market is segmented, with individuals frequently assigned to either the primary or secondary segment based on factors such as education, skills, social networks, and discrimination. While large corporations in the

[23] Pries 1997.

primary labor market can offer relatively higher salaries and stability, the secondary labor market consists of companies with lower levels of productivity and technology, which persist in the system by reducing wages.[24] Enterprises run by medium capitalized farmers and capitalized farmers constitute the second segment of the forestry labor market in the delta region.

Dual labor market theory helps explain the difficult working conditions of migrant workers in the secondary labor markets and the reluctance of many locals to work in these positions. One young Paraguayan worker said, "Paraguayans are the only ones doing most of the tough jobs here." Other Paraguayan workers explained that they do not mind working in such conditions. In recent years, the exchange rate for money earned in Argentina has not been favorable in Paraguay, although *hacer madera* (forestry work) remains a viable option,[25] especially "when there is no work available in Paraguay." While domestic work in agriculture and breeding may yield food products for the household, there is no salaried work that could provide the youth with the necessary monetary income to begin their own independent life projects.

The forestry labor market in the delta region is characterized by seasonal employment patterns. The busiest period is from May to August during the winter season when plantation operations require a lot of labor. Another busy period is the harvesting season, which can occur at any time of the year. Some workers are temporary migrants who seek employment in the region for a few months, after which they return home or move to nearby urban areas to work in construction. Some of these migrations may become repetitive and circular, with workers moving between different farms in the delta and returning home to see their families in December to "celebrate the Christmas holidays" and "take money home," then returning to the delta in January or February.

A few workers stay in the delta permanently and work in capitalized or medium capitalized forestry farms, occasionally going home for visits. Some of these workers lack legal entry documents and/or are minors, so the terms of negotiation with their *patrones* (employers) are very narrow. Besides, nowadays there is more control on the capitalized forestry farms, so farmers are also concerned about "documents."

[24] Mezzadra and Nielson (2014) say that demeanor, accent, style, and even physical appearance, as well as certain attitudes possessed by workers, who will be compliant and easy to discipline and control, are qualities that can be considered as skills. Often these characteristics are ascribed to migrants as they are defined as "good workers."
[25] *Hacer madera* is a local expression that refers to all the tasks done in forestry.

Migrants show little interest in improving their status in the host society as their jobs (*haciendo madera*) abroad typically pay better than those at home.[26] In fact, the jobs they take on during the migration period and the remittances they send home hold significant honor and prestige. According to Amartya Sen, people's ideas of what constitutes a "worthwhile life" may differ according to their experiences and aspirations. When faced with adverse circumstances, people often develop adaptive preferences that normalize inequalities such as material deprivation and social injustice.[27] In this way, the author criticizes welfarism and utilitarianism, arguing that focusing on preference satisfaction does not fully capture such adaptions and thus the ways in which self-assessments of well-being are likely to be distorted by deprivation.[28]

Paraguayan men accept informal work contracts and low wages for several reasons. One is the extreme poverty in their places of origin. Therefore, a low salary in Argentina can nonetheless significantly affect the social reproduction of relatives at home. Another reason is the idealization of Argentina's modern and European lifestyle by individuals born in rural Latin American areas. Finally, not all Paraguayans migrate with the intention to obtain a desirable job; some also aim to save money for their education or to visit previously migrated acquaintances, among other reasons.[29]

Migration Networks

From the farmers' point of view, labor costs are reduced by hiring migrants to work on the lower rungs of the employment ladder.[30] Recruiters and mediators facilitate this process in a "frictionless" manner.[31] Migrant recruitment often occurs through word of mouth, referrals, and personal connections.

Migration networks may account for the ongoing influx of Paraguayan male workers to the delta of the Paraná River. Recruiters[32] often provide financial assistance to

[26] McDaniel and Casanova (2003) say that the same occurs among Latin workers in the US forestry industry.
[27] Watts 2009.
[28] Watts 2009.
[29] Pizarro 2017.
[30] McDaniel and Casanova (2003) argue that in the US forest industry, the use of cheap migrant labor has allowed forest companies to reduce the cost of managing plantations and continue to invest in wood even when prices fall.
[31] Rye and O'Reilly 2022.
[32] Recruitment in the delta is an informal activity, different from forest labor contracting in the United States of America. The H-2B program is sponsored by the US government and there are certain guidelines that contractors and workers must follow. For example, workers cannot leave their jobs even if they are recruited for the worst ones. Workers who wish to remain legal are at the mercy of contractors for wages and working conditions. Another difference from the delta forestry labor market is that crews specialize in one service, such as hand planting or backpack herbicide spraying. See McDaniel and Casanova (2005).

migrant workers to purchase tickets to the delta, and they also offer job-searching support. Migrant worker networks employ a variety of strategies that allow migrant workers access to vital information about potential employers, suitable accommodations, and how to find good jobs.[33]

For example, a Paraguayan forestry worker told us that he was recruited by a cousin around 1990 to work at the plantation where he was still employed. He continued to work seasonally even after his cousin left. He crossed the international border numerous times over several years, periodically returning to his rural birthplace. He fell in love with a woman in his Paraguayan village but continued to travel for forestry work in the delta. After some years, he convinced her to marry him, and they went to "the island" together. Although she initially disliked "the island," they settled down and had three children. He continued to work in forestry, but she was not able to find a job because "there are scarce jobs for women" and she had to raise their children.

He started bringing family members and acquaintances from his Paraguayan village when his employer required seasonal laborers. Other farmers approached him with the same request due to his reputation for reliability and their confidence that the men he recruited would make excellent workers.

He was paid for each team's work and divided the earnings among the workers, keeping a percentage for himself. With the income from this, as well as his steady wage as a permanent laborer, he was able to accumulate enough savings to purchase a four-wheel truck and some land in Paraguay. In February of 2016, his brother, six brothers-in-law, and many other men from his home country were members of his teams on various plantations.[34]

Naturalization of Paraguayan Workers' Exploitation

Another factor that facilitates the unequal integration of migrant workers into the conditions characterizing secondary labor markets is the assumption that labor migration is inherently harsh, which allows for the normalization of reproducing and perpetuating exploitative practices. This can be understood in terms of hierarchization, one of the four central mechanisms of inequality genesis and promotion that Göran Therborn analyzes: distanciation, exclusion, hierarchization, and exploitation.[35]

[33] Segrave 2019.
[34] Pizarro 2017.
[35] Therborn 2012.

Paraguayans are classified in the forestry labor hierarchy as unequal because of their culture, race, gender, and place of origin, all of which make them suitable to be exploited and to be incorporated into the bottom of the hierarchy. These ethnic, racial, gender, and migration status classifications, based on widespread Argentine prejudices, purport the superiority of white, European-like people and legitimize the subordination and exploitation of indigenous people (and their descendants) born in rural areas of Argentine provinces or in border countries such as Paraguay and Bolivia.[36] These ideological frames are so taken for granted that they are barely expressed.[37] According to farmers, there would be no forestry without Paraguayan workers. One of them told us:

> My cousin [local], you give him a chainsaw and a little more he doesn't know how to start it. It's not that he doesn't know literally, but they [locals] have no performance. And people who can do it better [Paraguayans] have [a good] performance. A Paraguayan comes, because he knows how life is like in Paraguay, and he has a good performance.

Farmers are fond of Paraguayans because they think that there would be no forestry if it were not for their eagerness to work hard.[38]

Work on plantations is a hard, manual task that places strain on the migrants' bodies. The process of preparing the fields starts with clearing the land; for this task, teams of Paraguayans are hired and equipped with *machetes* (bowie knives) and chainsaws. In the winter months, the same or other hired teams plant trees, guides, and stakes by hand, carefully covering holes manually. Following planting, pruning and thinning take place in the spring and summer months using *machetes*, chainsaws, or two-handed shears. Weeding and controlling pests is also crucial during the initial years and is often achieved using insecticides, fungicides, and herbicides.

The harvesting period for poplars ranges from ten to sixteen years, while willows require between eight and twelve years, depending on the production destination. The harvesting operations include felling the trees, delimbing them with a *machete*, marking and cutting them with a chainsaw, manually stacking the logs in the field, loading them onto a tractor, and finally stacking them on the riverbank. This task is typically performed by a forestry crew consisting of a chainsaw operator, who turns and logs, and two assistants responsible for delimbing as well as cutting and stacking duties. The piled-up wood is transported to its destination on the coast by *chatas*, or barges, usually

[36] Pizarro 2012.
[37] Rye and O'Reilly 2022.
[38] Pizarro 2017.

equipped with hydraulic cranes for mechanical loading and unloading of the wood. Recently, forestry farmers have started using specialized machinery known as harvesters, which significantly decreases the amount of labor required for this process.

Working in forestry, *hacer madera* is a task always assigned to young males, under the presumption that a task requiring such strength can only be done by men. However, it is locally believed that Paraguayan workers are the most suitable for physically demanding tasks, such as handling *machetes* and chainsaws for pruning, thinning, and planting activities, under extremely precarious, informal, and poorly paid working and living conditions.

Referring to the importance of Paraguayan workers to the forestry industry in the area, a medium capitalized farmer said:

> At the moment . . . I work alone on the farm with some assistance from a couple of Paraguayans during harvest and planting seasons. Despite high demand for laborers, we can't get workers . . . [Argentinians] are lazy for this kind of work. They do not like it . . . The government gives them a subsidy . . . So the Creole[39] from the countryside is used to surviving with a few "*pesos*" [Argentine money] that he gets to buy what he can't get here in the countryside . . . It's a serious problem . . . And these guys from Paraguay tell me: "Now it's not very convenient for us to come because of the money exchange, but worse, we have nothing to do in Paraguay." They have no subsidy . . . So they come to work here all the same . . . It's just that the Argentine countryman doesn't like being in the field.

Another medium capitalized farmer said:

> (Paraguayans) have another culture . . . because they come, work, work. It is very difficult to get on par [with] a Paraguayan because they work! They kill themselves working. [They get up] at 4 am [and work until] 5 pm . . . Yes, there are many Paraguayans here. And the day in which they cease to come anymore, I do not know what we will do.

Precarious living conditions are also naturalized by local common-sense ideological frames. Paraguayans live on the farms in dwellings provided by the farmers.

[39] Creole means "criollo" in Argentina. In the Americas, it refers to people of European descent or their descendants who were born in the territories of the Spanish or Portuguese colonies. In the 19th century, the term was used to distinguish people born in Argentina from European migrants. Nowadays, it refers to people who live in the countryside and whose way of life includes traditional customs.

They are generally single men, though in a few cases, they settle down with their wives and children.

One of the medium capitalized farmers quoted above said that the Paraguayan man who gets him workers accommodates them in a *ranchito* (little house with only one room and in extremely precarious conditions); they work for some time and they take their money back home. A Paraguayan woman who lived in this place when she first arrived in "the island" was horrified when she saw the accommodation, because her husband had told her that they were going to live in a house, but the *ranchito* had only one room with a bed, kitchen, and bathroom. Concerning housing, one medium capitalized farmer said:

> Paraguayan workers must be given a relatively good place to live, according to the Paraguayans [culture] who set fire inside the house. Yes, many put the sticks and light the fire inside. You do not know what it is. The houses that they occupy are not always completely good, [but you must see] how they look after they leave.

There is an implicit assumption that these migrants cannot (and should not) expect anything better, with farmers providing "good jobs" and housing.[40] The working and living conditions of Paraguayan laborers vary based on the size of the farm where they are employed. Workers in capitalized farms generally live in relatively well-equipped houses and have formal employment contracts that guarantee their labor rights, although they do not have health insurance.

It is worth mentioning that this was not always the case some years ago. The recent improvement of working and living conditions in these farms could be attributed to two factors. First, over the past decade, state inspections of labor conditions and fiscal obligations of farmers have increased. Second, capitalized farms and timber industries are currently seeking to meet certain standards to certify Good Forestry Practices that include enhanced quality of working and living conditions.[41]

However, even companies that meet the necessary requirements still exhibit ethno-national discrimination. For instance, in one of the capitalized farms we visited, workers lived in different kinds of houses according not only to their labor position but also to their nationality. Local citizens or domestic migrants who worked as foremen or

[40] Rye and O'Reilly 2022.
[41] Pizarro 2017.

operated machinery were given the highest quality housing, while Paraguayans were offered older, smaller, and inferior housing.[42]

Thus, it is believed that Paraguayans have a strong "work culture" because of their peasant background, and that they are strong and resilient because of their "indigenous blood." Following Göran Therborn,[43] there is an institutionalized ranking of social actors, some high and some low, in the organization of the forest labor market. Super- and subordination and patron-client relationships, which characterize the mechanism of hierarchization, can be identified in the working and living conditions of Paraguayans.

There is another issue that contributes to inequality in this hierarchical system that is anchored in a value system. Argentine common sense has systematically discriminated against, among others, indigenous people and migrants of indigenous descent.[44] Farmers and local people reproduce arguments that naturalize the exploitation of Paraguayans in "everyday racism."[45] Argentine hegemonic structures of "otherness" are generally reproduced by people living in the Pampas region of Argentina, where the delta is located. These arguments based on race and culture perpetuate xenophobic discrimination and justify precarious working and living conditions.

Strong, Young, and Masculine Workers

Every society defines youth based on the practices and roles that individuals must fulfill during their life stages.[46] Additionally, gender denotes the socially assigned differential roles, values, representations, rights, and obligations that consider sexual differences as a point of reference and shape the identities that traverse all of thesubject’s experiences. Each society creates its own system for classifying sex and gender, transforming biological sexuality into specific gender regimes, which are the set of social norms that establish and regulate the behaviors considered appropriate for each gender.[47]

The sex/gender classification system on “the island” (among locals and Paraguayans) is binary and bases its constitutive activities on spheres clearly defined as masculine or feminine, which are considered complementary. This structure is organized around a patriarchal gender regime.[48]

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Therborn 2012.
[44] Pizarro 2012.
[45] Wodak and Reisigl 1999.
[46] Camarero 2023.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Connell 2015.

Men in Paraguay's rural areas are expected to provide for their families at an early age and are often tasked with operating the machinery. They are required to work to sustain their families. Meanwhile, women are considered as complementary rather than being equal with men.

In the delta, Paraguayan men work and frequent public spaces during their leisure time, whereas women have limited work opportunities and may either accompany their husbands to the fields or remain at home. This perpetuates the myth that women belong in the home and men in the public sphere. Patriarchy is embodied in women's daily lives.

A Paraguayan woman shared with us how she has adjusted her schedule to meet the needs of her husband:

> I wake up at 4 am to the sound of the alarm and prepare the kettle, and when he hears me leaving the bathroom he gets up. We drink *mate* [a local infusion made of yerba mate leaves] before he has his coffee at around 5 am and leaves. Although I would prefer to continue sleeping, I tend to household chores such as cooking before the children wake up.

This woman told us that her husband did not contribute anything to household maintenance—he would not even change a light bulb if it burned out. A member of the research team asked him what he planned to do while his wife and children moved to town so that their oldest daughter could go to college. He answered that cooking was not an issue since he cooked when he was single in the farms. Yet he pondered, "The problem is, who will do my laundry?"

One day, when he had to take a Paraguayan worker to the city very early in the morning, he told his wife to go with him. She remembered her husband's words: "I need to wake up at 4 o'clock this morning. You come with me, so you can make me *mate*, I'm not going to skip my *mate* and we will take him." This does not mean that he was only after his convenience. He might also cherish the sociability and emotional comfort offered by his wife. Nevertheless, she seemed to feel that this event was a bit of an imposition.

Migration is a scenario in which masculinities are embodied and practiced by young Paraguayans. They leave their homes at an early age, with migration representing a rite of passage to adulthood. Youth, marked by biological features that constitute their masculine bodies, defines their migratory trajectories until they marry or settle permanently in places where work is not so physically demanding, either on “the island,” in other places in Argentina, or in Paraguay.

A Paraguayan man remembered: "I came to the island when I was eighteen, the others were all grown up, in their twenties, they had more strength. And then I got used to it [making wood]." He learned how to operate the chainsaw by watching some friends. "And then once you do it you realize how it is." A medium capitalized farmer, who generally employs him, said that he "handles the chainsaw like a razor." The worker explained: "The fact is that I have worked many hours . . . I have learned to endure [making wood] . . . It's terrible. You have to get used to it. None of the Argentinians here want it."

Masculinity and youth are shaped by hard work and precarious living conditions, which Paraguayans are supposed to be able to tolerate because of their masculine and racial-ethnic nature.[49] Masculinities are crossed by traditional mandates of strength, courage, and economic commitment to the family.[50]

The lives of Paraguayan migrants are associated with the stereotype of the male provider—reckless, self-sufficient, and adventurous—but their masculinities are also marked by lack, exploitation, exclusion, marginalization, and violence.

Machismo—Emerging in the Research

There are male-exclusive areas on "the island" to socialize. Daily, friendships are formed on plantations and in houses where individuals cohabit. A sense of camaraderie develops on weekends when they gather at two clubs to play football and consume alcohol, at a local camping spot, at the home of a Paraguayan who sells drinks, or at the dwellings of certain workers.

While women are not typically expected to be physically present during work or drinking activities of males, they still play a role in the construction of the male identity. They are referred to in a sensual manner, and double entendres are made about them. Additionally, women are often expected to handle housework duties. *Machismo* (sexist ideology), closely tied to the public sphere, can also lead to behaviors such as drunkenness, violence, and adultery.[51]

[49] According to Brandth and Haugen (1998), forestry work is characterized as heavy, dirty, and dangerous, and is associated with dominant notions of rural masculinity. Forestry has typically been seen as manual work requiring the strength and skills of men. Hard work and being seen as a good "worker" have traditionally been a source of status. There are several masculine-gendered objects, such as the chainsaw or a pile of logs that characterize the image of a forestry worker.

[50] Be Ramírez and Salinas Boldo 2019.

[51] Be Ramírez and Salinas Boldo 2019.

Although *machismo* was not the objective of our research, comments about gender relations and sexist jokes often came up in our informal conversations during the Paraguayans' leisure time on Saturday evenings or Sundays. This was possible because each time we visited "the island," we stayed in a camping area for several days including the weekends. We typically conducted informal visits to the people we had encountered during our extended research project.

On a Saturday evening, we came across six or seven Paraguayans sitting in the courtyard of a house where two of them lived. They had recently returned from a farm where they had been engaged in *hacer madera*. We, a group of five researchers (two young women, three young men, and the author), had also just returned from a visit elsewhere. I was known to most of the men there. They kindly asked us to join them while they rested. We spoke with them for around an hour, and I noticed that alcohol was affecting some of the workers. Women were not usually present at such gatherings. They made increasingly *machistas* (sexist) jokes. This made me worry about my research teammates, so I eventually decided it was time for us to leave.

For example, one of the men asked me about my age. When I replied that I was fifty years old, somebody quietly remarked, "She's an old woman." My interlocutor laughed with the other workers, and replied: "No, no, not old lady. But you don't notice the years in a woman."

Another example follows: When drunk on the weekend, a worker usually reported being in love with his employer, a woman in her thirties who managed her father's farm. As he joined our group one day, another worker commented he was not there when she was about to pay him, saying, "She looked for you everywhere." He replied, "Well, that's good! If she is looking for me, then at least she wants me [laughs]."

There are other examples of sexism during this casual conversation. When I asked one of the workers: "How many children do you have?" he responded "One, I don't know if he's mine, but I said yes [laughs]." Another man told him: "You have to say that he is yours, I always say 'yes, yes, he is mine.'" Regarding girlfriends in Paraguay, a worker said that they "may wait for you, you may come for a year, and they wait for you." However, another worker joked, "How patient [laughs]! She's waiting for you with another man [laughs]." A third worker, who had left his wife and son behind in Paraguay, remarked, "I don't know if I'm going to find my wife, but I'm going to find my house for sure [laughs]." Finally, when I asked how they were treated by the employers, a man responded that they treated them well, but the girls did not.

I started to feel like it was time to leave when they made comments about one young female researcher in our team. When a male researcher refused another beer saying he was already drinking from the female researcher’s glass, a worker then commented,"He's drinking with his girlfriend." When the researchers clarified that they were friends, the worker repeated, “He's drinking with his girlfriend” amidst laughter.

The same uncomfortable situation repeated itself on several occasions. On a Saturday evening, we spoke with a Paraguayan worker who was considerably drunk. He commented to one of the female researchers,[52] "I can't believe that a pretty girl like you, a student of your age, has to suffer like this here on ‘the island.’ There are so many mosquitoes. Why are you experiencing these things?"

On a Sunday afternoon, we visited the worker and his family at their home. While the male researchers spent two hours drinking beer with the worker in the courtyard, no women were invited. This is a space traditionally associated with masculinity on “the island.” As the conversation and the beer were ending, the worker commented about the previous female researcher: "She turns red under the sun." When she approached, the worker said:

> The reason because you have a good life is the lack of sun exposure . . . do you know what they said [the male researchers who were with him]? That you have a boyfriend. Your legs attract attention, they are pig legs, have you seen the little hands when the suckling pig is on the counter? I would buy it.

Lack of sun exposure is a sign of beauty and status for indigenous peasants. For peasants and low-ranking workers (e.g., construction, agriculture), their skin is brown either because of exposure to the sun or because of indigenous features. In this context, white women are desirable as a status symbol: to make them or their descendants white. The researcher was very white and wore short pants because it was very hot. The Paraguayan said that her legs attracted him and made a comparison with pig's legs, whose color, when sold at the counter, look very similar to white human skin. According to the worker, the researcher should not work, but stay inside to avoid exposing herself to the sun and to remain attractive to men who are the ones expected to provide and conquer.

[52] Interviews were conducted by two or three interviewers when they shared an interest on the topics to be covered. The cases in which the entire research group interacted with Paraguayans in their leisure time were because we were invited as a group to share *mate*, beer, or some food. Occasionally they would visit us at the camping on Saturday nights.

Migrants' Aspirations. Enduring Social Inequalities

Rural labor migration is imbued with moral values that distinguish between good and evil and involve the acceptance or confrontation of structural conditions. In their daily practices, migrants often adapt to or perpetuate their own marginalized, subjugated, and invisible status.[53] They tend to naturalize their exploitation, adapting their preferences and self-assessments to the contexts of inequality in which they live.[54]

One of the workers provided his perspective on the level of difficulty of the different types of work available to Paraguayans in the delta. He said that *hacer madera* was the hardest work and he seemed to be comfortable with the other work he had had after being a chainsaw man. He stated that working as a chainsaw operator was "hard and sacrificing" and that he was fortunate to be a cattle keeper at the time we met. His uncle, who had brought him to "the island," had been working in forestry farms for a long time before his arrival, taking on any task assigned to him with great intensity. He referred to his uncle's work as being like that of a beast or a dogsbody.

He mentioned that he had worked in a sawmill some years ago, but he naturalized the hard work he had to do there: "That job was not physically demanding, but it posed danger. Careful handling was crucial to avoid accidents with the machines, even when using personal protective equipment." He commented on his present job: "You can see, it is not a hard work, I can practically organize my time." Previously, he had worked in construction in Buenos Aires, which had better pay but there were excessively high temperatures during the summer months. He also noted: "The cost of living in the city was more expensive. I had to pay my rent, food, everything." Thus, Paraguayans have aspirations, hopes, and dreams based on their own experiences and knowledge, and on the practices shared by those who have worked in the delta before them.

Another Paraguayan, who now works for a forestry company and lives with his family in a standard house provided by his employer, believes that his work history on "the island" has improved since he began as a chainsaw operator on various farms. Afterwards, he worked at a sawmill because "working in the plantation was too hard." After four years, he took up his current job at the farm. No longer does he cut wood with a chainsaw; instead, he prunes, because:

> Machines are now used for *hacer madera*. When I first arrived in 2007, there were very few machines available . . . The majority of people

[53] O'Reilly and Rye 2022.
[54] Watts 2009.

> manually carried the wood on their shoulders, lifted it onto the *cachapé* [a cart attached to a tractor], and then carried it to the coast to be loaded onto the boat. Day and night, the workers tirelessly unloaded and loaded the wood by hand.

He commented on a group of Paraguayans working for the same capitalized farm and residing in a farm-provided house: "They already live in a palace! Each one has a bed, mattress, and blankets, and [the employer] even bought them a TV . . . The house is large and comfortable, and everyone is no longer on top of each other."

Migrant workers may prioritize their hopes for a better imagined future over factual knowledge of the hardships experienced by other migrants, leading them to "willingly" enter migration trajectories despite the likely challenges, including exploitative work and living conditions.[55] For Paraguayans, migration is part of their habitus. A man told me, "If you want to live [in Paraguay], you can live. But if you want to study, you have to work. There is no work there . . . There are no jobs in Paraguay." Another man said, "There is work, but you still have to go out . . . And you earn less [in Paraguay]. Here you earn double."

The desire to migrate in search of a job is by itself insufficient to compel anyone to move. The dynamics of labor mobility are heavily influenced by the opportunities perceived and the imaginaries held by the migrants.[56] Young Paraguayan migrate to "the island" to fulfill personal desires: to study; achieve independence; seek adventure; and acquire material things such as clothes, music equipment, and cars that do not necessarily contribute to the family economy.[57] Migration is perceived as a means of gaining prestige.

Another factor that influences the tolerance of Paraguayan workers for harsh living and working conditions is the direct relationship that exists between the time migrants spend away from home and their economic improvement, since migrating without generating visible resources is perceived as a sign of failure. Men refer to migration as an obligation that is strongly linked to gender stereotypes that men as household providers. An indicator of this is the need that many of these men feel to have a home of their own. Migration is then a mandate, not a desire. Repressing emotions is

[55] O'Reilly and Rye 2022.
[56] Seiger et al. 2020.
[57] Be Ramírez and Salinas Boldo 2019.

necessary to cope with the challenges and social inequalities endured during the process.[58]

Returning to the three types of inequality,[59] all are useful in understanding Paraguayan migrants' social chances in life. Vital inequality concerns differences in the distribution of health and longevity, which can be measured by life expectancy and survival rates. Existential inequality restricts the freedom of certain social groups. It is a denial of recognition and respect and a source of humiliation. This is the case with stigmatized social groups. Material or resource inequality has two aspects: inequality of access to education and social capital and inequality of rewards in terms of income.

Paraguayan men residing in the delta of the Paraná River endure a triple burden of inequality. Health inequality particularly affects them, as their bodies are prematurely worn down by the demanding wood-making work that impacts their physical health, nutrition, and rest. Paraguayan male workers constitute a socially stigmatized group whose discrimination serves to reinforce their position in the lowest rungs of the labor hierarchy in forest plantations. They lack equal access to resources, including education, social capital, housing, technology, and modern amenities, as well as rewards. The primary factors driving inequality among Paraguayans include: the exclusion of peasants in their own country and the exclusion of low-skilled migrant workers in Argentina, both of which make it impossible for them to have access to a good life; the hierarchy of labor positions in the forest plantations, placing them in the lowest rungs; and exploitation, which is expressed in low wages and harsh working and living conditions in the fields.

Conclusions

In this paper, the cyclical and repetitive mobility of young male Paraguayans who work on forestry farms in the delta of the Paraná River in Argentina was analyzed.

On a macrostructural level, they participate in a secondary labor market that is characterized by low wages, low-skilled jobs, and precarious working and living conditions, among other features. While wages and working conditions may vary depending on the characteristics of each farm, they are generally inadequate and overtly exploitative. Paraguayans occupy the lowest rungs in the hierarchies of labor in farms. As a result, migrant workers perform the least profitable tasks.

[58] Be Ramírez and Salinas Boldo 2019.
[59] Therborn 2012.

The article referred to certain institutions that "smooth" the exploitation. Recruiters, who act as mediators between employers and Paraguayans, make labor arrangements with employers and are responsible for the Paraguayan workers they recruit. They provide them with work tools and pay them.

Additionally, there are discriminatory practices and discourses that target various social markers of inequality through hierarchization, one of the mechanisms that perpetuate exploitation and inequality.[60] The common belief that "Paraguayans are good at *hacer madera*" is a result of the naturalization of gender, generation, and ethnic nationality. The farmers' rhetoric of a "good worker" is a way to perpetuate the precarious employment of migrants. There are ideological frames held by some employers, migrants, and locals alike that assume local people are not willing to do the work that migrants do.[61]

Paraguayan gender regimes, especially masculine stereotypes, also influence the obfuscation of labor inequalities. Migration leads young people to embody and put into practice certain *machistas* ideas: that men should be courageous and take risks; that they should endure exhausting workdays; that they should demonstrate that they are strong, skillful, tough, and fit for work; and that they should fulfill the responsibility of providing for their families.[62] For young Paraguayan males, migration represents a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood.

Finally, the article discussed the hopes and expectations of Paraguayans and how they value their migration experiences, considering them as adaptive preferences that naturalize exploitation and limit the focus of the search for equality, freedom, and justice.[63] Several reasons motivate them to migrate, including supporting their families, purchasing a home, seeking education, and experiencing modern lifestyles. Becoming a respected man is an idea that traverses those motivations.

Notably, Paraguayans' expectations regarding working and living conditions frequently overlook their unequal positions. They endure vital, existential, and resource/material inequalities.[64] Exploitation and discrimination are thus not openly contested. From the Paraguayans' point of view, it is not so bad to tolerate vital and existential inequality if they can improve resource inequality.

[60] Therborn 2012.
[61] O'Reilly and Rye 2022.
[62] Be Ramírez and Salinas Boldo 2019.
[63] Watts 2009.
[64] Therborn 2012.

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