

Original article



## Impact of the Gender and Agroecology course on the curriculum of the Master's degree in Agroecology

**Impacto del curso Género y Agroecología al currículo de la maestría en Agroecología**

**Impacto do curso de Gênero e Agroecologia no currículo do Mestrado em Agroecologia**

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### ABSTRACT

Postgraduate training in agroecology faces the challenge of integrating a gender perspective to address inequalities in agri-food systems. The Master's Program in Agroecology and Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Pinar del Río incorporated the course "Gender and Agroecology" to train professionals capable of critically analyzing these relationships. The objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of this course on the master's curriculum, based on three dimensions: appropriation of the theoretical framework, development of research skills, and transformation of professional practice. Perception surveys, analysis of thesis projects, interviews, and focus groups were used. The main results obtained were: students adopted the theoretical framework on gender

and agroecology; 60% of thesis projects incorporated gender categories; and transformations were evident in their extension, teaching, and project management practices. It is concluded that the course had a positive impact in the comprehensive training of master's students, enhancing their capacity to transform Cuban reality. It is recommended to integrate this topic into other forms of professional development.

**Keywords:** agroecology; curriculum; impact assessment; gender; master's degree.

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## RESUMEN

La formación de posgrado en agroecología enfrenta el desafío de integrar la perspectiva de género para responder a las inequidades en los sistemas agroalimentarios. La Maestría en Agroecología y Agricultura Sostenible de la Universidad de Pinar del Río incorporó el curso Género y Agroecología para formar profesionales capaces de analizar críticamente estas relaciones. El objetivo de este estudio fue evaluar el impacto de este curso en el currículo de la maestría, a partir de tres dimensiones: apropiación del referencial teórico, desarrollo de habilidades investigativas y transformación del modo de actuación profesional. Se aplicaron encuestas de percepción, análisis de proyectos de tesis, entrevistas, y grupos de discusión. Los principales resultados obtenidos fueron: los estudiantes asumieron el referencial teórico sobre género y agroecología; el 60 % de los proyectos de tesis incorporaron categorías de género; y se evidenciaron transformaciones en su práctica extensionista, docente y de gestión de proyectos. Se concluye que el curso tuvo un impacto positivo en la formación integral de los maestrantes, potenciando su capacidad para transformar la realidad cubana. Se recomienda transversalizar la temática en otras formas de superación profesional.

**Palabras clave:** agroecología; currículo; evaluación de impacto; género; maestría.

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## RESUMO

A formação de pós-graduação em agroecologia enfrenta o desafio de integrar uma perspectiva de gênero para abordar as desigualdades nos sistemas agroalimentares. O Programa de Mestrado em Agroecologia e Agricultura Sustentável da Universidade de Pinar del Río incorporou a disciplina "Gênero e Agroecologia" para formar profissionais capazes de analisar criticamente essas relações. O objetivo deste estudo foi avaliar o impacto dessa disciplina no currículo do mestrado, com base

em três dimensões: apropriação do referencial teórico, desenvolvimento de habilidades de pesquisa e transformação da prática profissional. Foram utilizados questionários de percepção, análise de trabalhos de conclusão de curso, entrevistas e grupos focais. Os principais resultados obtidos foram: os alunos adotaram o referencial teórico sobre gênero e agroecologia; 60% dos trabalhos de conclusão de curso incorporaram categorias de gênero; e transformações foram evidentes em suas práticas de extensão, ensino e gestão de projetos. Conclui-se que a disciplina teve um impacto positivo na formação integral dos mestrandos, ampliando sua capacidade de transformar a realidade cubana. Recomenda-se a integração desse tema em outras formas de desenvolvimento profissional.

**Palavras-chave:** agroecologia; currículo; avaliação de impacto; gênero; mestrado.

## INTRODUCTION

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality), requires a profound transformation of education systems at all levels. The training of professionals in agroecology faces the challenge of overcoming the androcentric bias present in agricultural science curricula.

As Vázquez García *et al.* (2023) point out: "the results identified an androcentric bias in the teaching content, in addition to gender discrimination in classroom coexistence" (p. 414). The authors conclude that "mainstreaming the gender perspective in higher education is key to counteracting sexist discrimination and contributing to forming a student body sensitive to this and other forms of social inequality" (p. 427).

In higher education, this means not only guaranteeing access, but also questioning and reformulating curricula to make them inclusive and equitable. The training of professionals in agroecology, a field called upon to address the crisis in agri-food systems, is no exception to this challenge.

Agroecology, understood as a science, practice, and social movement (Wezel *et al.*, 2009), seeks the ecological, economic, and social sustainability of agriculture. However, several studies have shown that the teaching of agricultural and agroecological sciences has historically reproduced an androcentric bias, rendering invisible the fundamental role of women as guardians of agrobiodiversity and agents of change in rural territories (Vázquez García *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, ignoring the gender dimension in the training of agroecologists results in producing professionals with an incomplete

perspective, incapable of understanding and transforming the inequalities that structure food systems.

Agroecology aims to ensure that production processes in the rural area are part of a context of social, environmental and economic sustainability. The construction and transition towards sustainability cannot be dissociated from a relevant reading of generic or intrageneric power relations, which are verified in the scenario it is intended to transform. In this way, it is only possible to think about sustainability development processes if the elimination of all forms of discrimination, inequality and violence is guaranteed. Thus, achieving gender and gender equity is not a unique condition, but it is necessary to achieve sustainability.

Gender is a category of analysis used by the social sciences that allows us to interpret the characteristics and differences between men and women, as well as the relationships that exist between them and those established with the natural and social environment.

Caram León (2014) states that:

... gender is a social construct that in each society has its own proposed models for the sexes and that can vary over time; finding its origin in the complexity of the historical and cultural processes that govern the behavior of people and are transmitted from generation to generation, through the process of socialization, which is where the dominant behaviors that are perpetuated are learned and incorporated (p. 10).

The gender approach, according to Vega Ugalde (1995) is not only a neutral analytical instrument, but a political perspective that aims at reversing women's subordinated status in society, and any other human hierarchies that condemn and suppress differences. Hence the importance of including the gender approach in agroecology, not only as a tool to improve interventions, but as an integral proposal to improve the quality of life for women and men, ensuring in all its phases, equal opportunities and equitable development of all involved persons.

The Master's Program in Agroecology and Sustainable Agriculture emerged as a response to the crisis of conventional agricultural models, training professionals capable of addressing the transition to sustainable agricultural systems. In this context, the incorporation of the Gender and Agroecology course into the master's program curriculum represents a crucial educational intervention. The course aims, as a general objective, to enable master's students to critically analyze the relationships

between gender and agroecology. with special relevance to the study of tools and specific situations that enable the empowerment of women and a reconstruction of gender relations, from the use of active and problem-based teaching methods, with the aim of enhancing the critical analysis of the processes of transformation of the current Cuban reality, assuming the values of identity, responsibility and industriousness.

The present work aims to evaluate the impact of incorporating this course into the master's curriculum, focusing on the skills developed by students and the transformations in their professional performance.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research was conducted within the framework of the Master's Program in Agroecology and Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Pinar del Río. To evaluate the impact of the Gender and Agroecology course, the procedure for assessing the impact of developed skills, proposed by Arteaga Prado and Silvera García (2019), was applied. This procedure allows for a comprehensive analysis of how the learning acquired in a training setting translates into effective competencies for professional practice. It includes the following phases:

1. Initial diagnostic phase: application of instruments to identify the starting level of the students in relation to the skills to be developed.
2. Formative implementation phase: development of the educational intervention (in this case, the Gender and Agroecology course) with emphasis on the observation and recording of the process.
3. Impact assessment phase: application of post-training instruments to measure changes in skills and professional performance.

### **Operational definition of the variable**

The variable under study was the impact of incorporating the Gender and Agroecology course into the training process of master's students. This impact is understood as the set of changes, both in individual perceptions and in academic production and professional performance of the students, attributable to the influence of the course, and which demonstrate an integration of the gender perspective into their professional practice.

Based on this definition, and the overall objective of the course, the following dimensions and indicators were determined for the impact assessment.

**Table 1.** Dimensions and indicators for impact assessment

Dimensions	Conceptual definition	Indicators
Dimension 1. Appropriation of theoretical content on gender and agroecology	Degree to which students incorporate the fundamental concepts, categories, and analytical frameworks of the gender perspective applied to agroecology.	Recognition of key concepts (gender, equity, empowerment, sexual division of labor).
		Identification of gender inequalities in the rural sector.
		Understanding the theoretical relationship between feminisms and agroecology.
Dimension 2. Development of research skills with a gender perspective	Students' ability to incorporate gender categories into their research designs, thesis projects, and other academic productions.	Incorporation of gender variables into research objectives and questions.
		Use of methodologies that highlight the role of women.
		Quality of theoretical argumentation on gender in projects.
Dimension 3. Transformation of the professional mode of action	Observable changes in students' professional practice (outreach, teaching, project management) that reflect the incorporation of the gender perspective.	Incorporation of the gender approach in extension practice.
		Introduction of gender content into teaching work.
		Design of projects or actions that promote the empowerment of women.
		Sensitivity to identify and question inequities in the work environment.

Source: Own elaboration

The study used a purposive sample consisting of:

Group I: 25 master's students who took the Gender and Agroecology course in the 2023 and 2024 editions.

Group II: 5 professors from the master's faculty, including the program coordinator and thesis tutors.

The methods and instruments used were:

Document analysis: review of course syllabi and, primarily, students' thesis projects at two points in time: before taking the course and after completing it. An analysis guide was developed to identify the incorporation of gender categories.

Perception survey: applied to students at the beginning and end of the course, to measure changes in their conceptions about gender and agroecology.

Semi-structured interviews: in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 students and the five teachers, to qualitatively explore the perceived changes, the difficulties faced and the transformations in the way of professional performance.

Groups: At the end of the course, two discussion groups were held with the students to collectively deepen their learning and reflect on the implications of the gender perspective in their future professional performance.

The quantitative data from the surveys were processed using descriptive statistics with Microsoft Excel software. The qualitative information obtained from the interviews, observation, and focus groups was analyzed using thematic content analysis.

To ensure the validity and consistency of the results, methodological triangulation was applied, contrasting the information obtained from different sources and methods.

## RESULTS

The results obtained provide a comprehensive and detailed view of the impact of the Gender and Agroecology course on the training of master's students. These results are presented below, organized according to the three dimensions evaluated, with each dimension broken down into its

respective indicators based on information obtained through the perception survey (pre-test and post-test), the analysis of thesis projects, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups.

### **Dimension 1.** Appropriation of the theoretical framework on gender and agroecology

This dimension assesses the degree to which students incorporate the fundamental concepts, categories, and analytical frameworks of the gender perspective applied to agroecology.

The perception survey administered at the beginning and end of the course showed significant progress in the students' conceptual understanding. In the pretest, when asked to define what they understood by "gender" in the agricultural context, only 20% of the students offered a definition close to the social science perspective (culturally and socially constructed differences between men and women). The remaining 80% associated the term with "sex" or "women", without further elaboration.

In the post-test, 88% of the students demonstrated mastery of the fundamental concepts, defining gender as a relational and structural category and correctly linking it to terms such as equity, empowerment, and the sexual division of labor. The focus groups confirmed this learning: the students used these concepts naturally in their contributions, demonstrating their integration into their professional vocabulary.

The perception survey quantified the change in students' ability to identify gender inequalities in the Cuban rural context. In the pretest, students were presented with a list of potential inequalities (access to land, participation in organizations, recognition of work, access to credit, etc.) and asked to indicate which ones they believed affected women in rural Cuba.

The results showed that, before the course, 60% of students had a low level of awareness (identifying only one or no inequities), 28% a medium level (two or three inequities), and only 12% a high level (four or more inequities). In the post-test, this distribution changed dramatically: 64% reached a high level of awareness, 28% remained at a medium level, and only 8% remained at a low level.

The most identified inequalities after the course were: limited access to land (mentioned by 92% of the students), invisibility of women's productive and reproductive work (88%), scarce participation in decision-making spaces (84%) and less access to technical assistance (76%).

In the final discussion groups, the students demonstrated an understanding of the points of convergence between feminism and agroecology. One participant contributed: "I understood that agroecology cannot be solely ecological; it must also be social. And the social aspect necessarily includes gender. You can't talk about food sovereignty if women don't have control over the land, the seeds, and the resources. Feminism gives us the tools to understand why this happens and how to change it."

Another student added: "The course helped me see that rural women are the ones who truly sustain agrobiodiversity. They preserve the seeds, know the uses of the plants, and pass on their knowledge. Without a gender perspective, agroecology remains an incomplete, technical view."

### **Dimension 2.** Development of investigative skills with a gender perspective

This dimension assesses students' ability to incorporate gender categories into their research designs, thesis projects, and other academic productions.

The analysis of the 25 students' thesis projects, comparing the versions before and after the course, constitutes one of the most robust indicators of impact. Before taking the course, only 10% of the projects mentioned women tangentially in their studies, generally as part of the description of the production unit, but without constituting a category of analysis. After the course, 60% of the projects (15 out of 25) explicitly incorporated gender categories as central or complementary variables in their objectives, research questions, or theoretical framework.

Table 2 details the main emerging gender categories in thesis projects after the course (N=15 projects that include them).

**Table 2.** Emerging gender categories

<b>Identified gender category</b>	<b>Projects that incorporate it (%)</b>
The role of women in seed conservation and agrobiodiversity	53.3% (8 projects)
Sexual division of labor in agroecological production units	46.7% (7 projects)
Women's access to and control of resources (land, water, credit, technical assistance)	40.0% (6 projects)
Women's participation in decision-making spaces	33.3% (5 projects)
Empowerment and economic autonomy of rural women	26.7% (4 projects)

Source: Prepared by the author based on the analysis of 25 thesis projects

These data reveal that the students not only became more aware of the issue, but also acquired theoretical and methodological tools to operationalize a gender perspective in their research. The most frequent categories relate to women's productive and reproductive roles, which directly aligns with the course content on feminist economics and agroecology.

### **Dimension 3.** Transformation of the professional mode of action

This dimension assesses the observable changes in students' professional practice (outreach, teaching, project management) that reflect the incorporation of the gender perspective.

The semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 students and their five supervising professors allowed for a deeper understanding of the transformations in professional practice. The testimonies gathered demonstrate qualitative changes in how the master's students conceive of and carry out their practice.

One master's student expressed: "Before the course, my work was limited to teaching cultivation techniques, talking about organic fertilizers and pest control. Now, when I arrive in a community, I pay attention to who makes the decisions about what to plant, who controls the money from sales, who safeguards the heirloom seeds. I realize that women are the ones who maintain diversity, but they are almost never the ones who make the decisions. That has changed my approach; now I look for opportunities to listen to them and strengthen their participation."

Another student, who is researching agroecological farms, noted: "In my thesis, I initially only planned to measure biodiversity and productivity indicators. After the course, I decided to include a variable on women's work on the farm. I realized that without their invisible labor, the farm wouldn't be sustainable. My advisor supported me, and now my research has a much more comprehensive approach."

A student involved with a cooperative commented: "In the cooperative, female members are a minority and almost never hold leadership positions. I'm working with them to strengthen their leadership skills and to raise awareness among the male members. It's not easy; there's resistance, but we've already managed to get two women to run for the board of directors."

This change in the mode of action is particularly relevant since the true impact of postgraduate training lies not only in the accumulation of knowledge, but in the ability of professionals to transform their practice and, with it, the reality in which they intervene.

Methodological triangulation confirmed the consistency of these findings.

## DISCUSSION

The results obtained from applying the procedure of Arteaga Prado and Silvera García (2019) demonstrated the positive impact of incorporating a specific course on gender into a postgraduate program in agroecology. These findings are consistent with and contrasted by the specialized literature on the subject.

The significant shift in students' perceptions, from a predominantly technical view of agroecology to a more complex understanding that incorporates social and gender dimensions, aligns with the findings of Benítez *et al.* (2020), who, in their study of the PIAL (Local Agricultural Innovation Project) in Cuba, documented how the explicit incorporation of a gender perspective in agricultural innovation projects "facilitates female participation and leadership and contributes to positive economic, ecological, and sociocultural changes in rural households and communities" (p. 7). The Cuban authors participating in this study emphasize that working with a gender perspective in Cuban agriculture is "challenging deeply ingrained norms of both femininity and masculinity" (p. 1).

The increase from 12% to 64% in the high recognition of gender inequalities in the rural sector shows that the course acted as a space for deconstruction and awareness-raising, allowing students to identify problems that were previously naturalized in their professional view.

The students' demonstrated understanding of the theoretical relationship between feminism and agroecology aligns with the conceptual framework developed by Benítez *et al.* (2020), who argue that agroecology as a social movement "includes an active political agenda to challenge power dynamics, including those rooted in gender, and to promote structural changes in food systems" (p. 3). This three-dimensional view of agroecology — as a science, practice, and social movement — is fundamental for training professionals with a transformative perspective.

Furthermore, the incorporation of gender categories in 60% of thesis projects after the course is confirmed, which constitutes an impact indicator. The emerging categories - women's role in seed

conservation, sexual division of labor, access to resources, organizational participation and empowerment - coincide with the lines of research that the specialized literature identifies as priority at the intersection of gender-agroecology.

Vázquez-López and Córdova-Martínez (2026), in their study on sustainable development strategies in Cuban cooperatives, highlight the importance of "valuing traditional knowledge" and "organizational strengthening" as fundamental axes for sustainable local development; elements that emerged in the master's thesis projects. These authors propose that cooperative agriculture, when based on a comprehensive and participatory approach, can become an engine of sustainable local development, which supports the participatory methodological approach adopted by the students in their research.

The incorporation of the category "sexual division of labor" in research projects reflects the appropriation of a central concept for understanding productive dynamics in the Cuban context. In this regard, Benítez *et al.* (2020) They document how in the PIAL project "women were underrepresented in the early stages and, as a result, their preferred criteria for seed selection, which often differed from those of their male counterparts, did not receive due consideration" (p. 4). This background justifies the need to train researchers sensitive to these differences.

The quality of the theoretical argumentation observed in the projects demonstrates that the course provided solid conceptual tools. As Cobián *et al.* (2024) point out, the integration of agroecology into higher education requires a pedagogical model that incorporates ancestral knowledge and collaborative learning, which necessarily implies mastery of the discipline's theoretical foundations. The students' argumentative strength is based precisely on their access to these conceptual frameworks.

The changes reported by students in their outreach, teaching, and project management practices constitute the most significant evidence of the course's impact. These findings are consistent with those documented by Benítez *et al.* (2020). Regarding the impacts of the PIAL project:

Increased inclusion of women in the development and implementation of agricultural innovations; increased self-confidence of female farmers and members of farming families; increased productive diversification on family farms; and increased employment and family income through micro-industries led by women (p. 6).

The shift in perspective and intervention strategies, which now intentionally include women, aligns with the arguments put forth by Martínez Corona and Díaz Cervantes (2005), cited by Vázquez García *et al.* (2023), regarding the need for gender-sensitive training methodologies for rural women that begin with the recognition of their knowledge. Thus, including women is not only a matter of equity, but also a prerequisite for the effectiveness of rural development interventions, as they are often the ones who sustain productive diversity and traditional knowledge.

The design of projects and actions aimed at empowering women by students demonstrates an applied understanding of the empowerment category.

### **On the training process and its transformative impact**

The results obtained are especially relevant in the context of the transformations taking place in Cuban agriculture. González Viera *et al.* (2024) They highlight the contribution of local agri-food systems that operate through participatory innovation management, an approach that is fundamental in the context of the transformations in Cuban agriculture. The training of professionals with a gender perspective at the postgraduate level is a response to this challenge.

Nova González (2022) highlights that agroecology, as both a scientific discipline and a social movement, has the capacity to adapt to diverse contexts and production scales, integrating economic, ecological, and cultural dimensions. This holistic vision promotes the sustainability of agricultural practices while generating economic benefits for rural communities and strengthening their cultural identity. A core aspect of this approach is its ability to articulate scientific knowledge with traditional wisdom in the sustainable production of food. In line with this perspective, the Master's Program in Agroecology and Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Pinar del Río, by incorporating the course Gender and Agroecology, contributes to the training of professionals with a comprehensive understanding of agri-food systems, sensitive to the social and cultural dimensions that determine their sustainability.

In the broader international context, Altieri and Nicholls (2020), in their analysis of agroecology published in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, argue that agroecology and the reconstruction of agriculture post-COVID-19 necessarily require the incorporation of social and equity dimensions, since resilient food systems cannot be built on foundations of inequality. The experience evaluated here aligns with this global perspective.

It is thus concluded that mainstreaming the gender perspective in agroecological higher education constitutes an effective way to train professionals capable of understanding and transforming the structural inequalities that persist in the rural sector, contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and social justice in the current Cuban context.

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### **Conflict of interest**

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

### **Authors' contribution**

The authors participated in the design and writing of the article, in the search and analysis of the information contained in the consulted bibliography.



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