



SUMMARY

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HIDDEN LIVES
An anthropological study of rural women

This ethnographic study was a response to a need to conduct anthropological research, which focuses on the experiences of different rural and farm women in Croatia. This is a valuable contribution because lived experiences, particularly among women have remained largely untheorised and marginalised from rural research conducted in Croatia. To uncover the lived and sometimes 'hidden' experiences of rural women, the grounded and comparative empiricism of anthropology provides opportunities to move beyond statistics and gender stereotypes to explore specific aspects of rural gendered life. Correspondingly, participant observation and qualitative research interviews were principally used as the most appropriate ways of grasping and giving voice to women's (and men's) everyday lives and experiences. Fieldwork for this study was conducted in six rural villages (74 households) in Slavonia, in the County of Vukovar-Sirmium.

One of the key concepts underlying this book is that our gendered identities are constructed and performed in particular ways, which help us understand who we are and how we fit in the world. For this reason, this study does not examine the objective category of 'women' but engages with the subjective ideas and practices making up different femininities. Its purpose is to reveal the diverse and multifaceted gendered experiences of rural and farm women as well as their expressions of gender in rural areas. This book attempts to show that the experience of being a woman (or a man) is often complex, ambiguous, and fluid rather than homogeneous. Further, this book opens up discussions on how gender should be understood as a process that is relational (between people where women are defined in relation to men and vice versa) and dynamic, i.e., how it changes in different cultural contexts and in time and space. In other words, our gendered being (through doing, saying and thinking) depends on whom we interact with and the discourses that we encounter.

In an attempt to understand women's 'realities', perceptions, as well as their engagement in these worlds, this

study starts with an exploration of their personal perspectives and then moves on to learn about their homes, families, and wider social networks. In other words, this book undertakes to contextualise women's circumstances and to learn about their lives, perspectives and actions. It also illuminates the larger structures and processes that mediate their experiences in rural areas. An overview of the socio-cultural, political (as well as historical) contexts that reflect conditions as they appear at the macro-level is provided through a review of available and relevant demographic statistics and reports. In addition, it explores to what extent rural space determines how people live and think about gender and shows how women are involved in rural social worlds and how they experience and interpret this involvement. Although gender is taken as the key focus, this study also investigates how women's experiences are influenced by the interweaving influences of age, marital/maternal status, education, employment, religion and personal/familial background. Specifically, it emphasises the complex ties between domesticity, femininity and rurality as they interrelate to influence the (domestic) identities of contemporary rural and farm women. Further, this book aims to explore how powerfully traditionally feminine identities (acceptable rural femininities) are embedded and reinforced in the performance of gender but how they are also negotiated and contested by some women. Thus, rather than seeing rural women as passive victims of patriarchal structures, this study attempts to bring out their agency and the creative ways they take control of their lives in often difficult circumstances.

The significance of foregrounding the embodied, situated and subjective self of the researcher in research is highlighted in the third chapter because researchers do not simply observe but are active agents in the production of meaning. This chapter emphasises that the researcher's research gaze, attention, choices, questions, and engagements all create knowledge. In addition to academic background, researchers' personal experiences and memories as well as temperament and personalities influence the choice of research sites, themes, design and theoretical approaches. Incontestably, the lived world between researchers and the people that they study adds reality to the field. Thus, awareness of the different selves and their changing nature (personal/ethnographic-professional) that researchers bring to the field are significant. Incontestably, since ethnographic fieldwork is constituted within a discourse of immersion, reflexivity, and rapport, the ethnographic self cannot always be easily extracted.

In addition, this chapter shows how dilemmas can sway research focus and empathy but also provide opportunities to revise research plans and create space for dialogues. Finally, this chapter confirms how there is a crucial need to include researchers' experiences and memories into research accounts because the invisibility of the researcher only limits our understandings and upholds researchers' power over their participants.

Chapter 4 on gendered values and attitudes specifically looks at how values and attitudes are emphasised, held and sustained by rural women and the wider community. It explores some indicators of traditionalism (patterns of residence, levels of education, attitudes to women's employment) showing that gendered values and attitudes in these rural areas were and continue to be deeply anchored in tradition. Girls learn early from other women as well as from circulating discourses about respectable femininity that in many ways 'bounds' them. Girls and women must continually watch themselves. From earliest childhood, they are taught and encouraged to behave in an appropriate gendered way and socialised into housekeeping skills by other women in the household. Without doubt, the 'socialisation mould' endorses compliance and submissiveness among girls in rural spaces where there is a marked lack of progressive female roles and a lack of support. The ideal woman and her ideal place is perceived by the majority to be a home-maker (*domaćica*) who is primarily responsible for the home, family problems and children while all other duties are secondary. Further, most women (with only a few exceptions) defined their experiences of womanhood through the realms of home, family, and interpersonal relationships. They focused their narration around highly traditional themes such as femininity; motherhood; caring and self-sacrifice for their children and other family members; their responsibility for maintaining the family and a harmonious family atmosphere; as well as housekeeping and 'homemaking'. Although these are all ways of doing 'respectable' femininity they can also entail confinement for women because they are prevented in many ways from obtaining other forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic). These aspects of a rural way of life that are most valued by women appear to be those that offer them the least opportunity to make choices. Understandably, in the absence of options, women strictly adhere to traditional beliefs because they do not have any other ways of gaining social power.

Chapter 5 is on the meanings and practices of domestic labour and how this work has far-reaching ramifications

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for women in rural spaces. By focussing on the domestic realm, this research recovers both past and contemporary experiences of rural and farm women; experiences that are all too often neglected and marginalised in academic writings. This chapter shows how doing housework (domestic labour) and being satisfied with this arrangement is more an indication of what women (and men) should do rather than other factors that play a part in this division. This division also reflects the much broader organisation of these rural communities/villages around assumptions of gender. Findings show that their domestic work entails less choice (as it is low-control); women feel more responsible and accountable for this work and consequently do more. In addition, homemaking which ensures the physical, emotional psychological and economic well-being of their families is another important task that women carry out. This chapter convincingly shows that the domestic work that women do produces gender relations as well as creates well being for individuals, the family and wider community but that this burden also has repercussions on women's lives. Both the advantages and disadvantages of domestic labour for rural and farm women are outlined in this chapter. Conclusions stress that regardless of the benefits, gendered divisions of domestic labour relegate women to an inferior position where they often have little power in the rural household, despite their multiple contributions. Since rural and farm women have significantly less access to resources and limited ways of easing the burden of their household duties, it is more difficult for these women to fulfil their potential.

Chapter 6 shows that rural development, which in turn affects overall development (i.e., viability and sustainability of a country) can be hindered by the following: i) rural women's lack of access to different forms of capital (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic); and ii) prevalent dominant rural ideologies that to a large extent determine women roles and positions as well as construct obstacles to public participation in rural areas. This chapter shows that women tend to have lower levels of capital due to traditional rural practices (e.g., as a rule they do not inherit land, they are frequently economically dependent, they are not encouraged to pursue further education, and they do not have wide social networks etc.). This chapter also shows that prevalent rural ideologies prescribe traditional roles for women that are simultaneously sustained by a marked lack of infrastructure (preschool institutions, support services, specialised medical care e.g., gynaecological, mental health care; efficient transport system).

One of the conclusions drawn in this chapter is that rural women could feasibly contribute to rural development if these obstacles are addressed in rural policies. Based on findings in this study, rural women are often required to inhabit different places and *habituses*, making them skilled at organisation, coordination and adaptation and in many instances men cannot substitute them. Finally, this chapter shows how it is fundamental to pay attention to the conditions, situations and needs of men and women as well as address gender disparities (gaps/differences) and inequalities that were and are today barriers to rural development.

Finally, in the last chapter, the significance of education, mobility and leisure and how investment in these areas can contribute to empowerment and a higher quality of life among rural and farm women is discussed. Throughout this book it is argued that women in many ways are excluded from rural spaces if they do not 'fit in' with the hegemonic construction of rural womanhood i.e., respectable femininity. Hence, it is often difficult for rural and farm women to resist social pressures to conform. On the other hand, individual transgressions are not enough to upset this gender order that marginalises women and makes them invisible. However, it is argued that different social locations (in education, employment, leisure) for rural and farm women would mediate and shape new constructions of gender and rurality. In other words, participation in these spheres would give women's voices and activities visibility. In turn, an articulated 'common voice' among these women would create possibilities to challenge discriminatory practices and to dispel myths and stereotypes that are damaging. Importantly, these other ways of doing gender would also promote a more progressive notion of womanhood, i.e. a *self-reliant* femininity that sustains women's independence, power, strength/resistance, assertiveness, personal development, lifestyle changes and determination.