Over the last two decades, rural areas across Latin America have undergone significant processes of transformation. These include an increasing diversification of rural livelihoods, international migration and the growing importance of remittances in the rural economy, and an increasing flexibilisation of work (Kay, 2008). A main feature of the gender dimension of rural transformation is the increase in women's participation in the rural labour force. However, at the same time, gender-based differences in access to productive resources and rural labour markets still seem to persist (Deere and León, 2003; Katz, 2003).

The articles in this collection focus on gender roles and relationships in the context of rural transformation processes. They place particular emphasis on the role of different institutions in shaping rural gender relations. This includes not only ‘formal’ institutions, such as the state, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community institutions and rural households, but also institutions in the form of legal, social and cultural norms.

State interventions in rural regions of Latin America have generally been based on a ‘male household head and breadwinner’ and ‘female housewife’ model, which, for example, have led to women’s exclusion from land reform programmes and rural development projects. However, in some cases, legal norms regarding the asset management within families, such as marital and inheritance regimes, have made substantial advances in terms of gender equity. Yet this is not always reflected in local social norms and in actual practice at household level. María Farah offers an analysis of the changes in gender bargaining over immovable assets in households in a rural municipality in the Colombian Andes, linking it, among other factors, with changing social norms and practices related to household headship.

There has also been a shift in some Latin American state policies towards poor and rural women, targeting them mainly in their reproductive role through conditional cash transfer schemes aiming to improve nutrition, health and education in rural settings. Odra Saucedo examines moral discourses of obligation and sanction that are implicitly embedded in the ‘conditional’ nature of the Mexican Oportunidades (government social assistance) programme and that have gendered the interaction of rural poor households with state health institutions.

Non-state actors, such as NGOs, have also been involved in processes of rural development and transformation. While some organisations have based their work on ‘traditional’ (static) views of rural gender relations, others are seeking to promote
‘equity’ in gender relations. Using the case of cooperative craft production in the Southern Peruvian Andes, Kathrin Forstner examines how women’s work combined with the training and networking facilitated by NGOs has affected gender discourses and practices in a rural setting.

Private companies offer opportunities for non-farm wage labour to rural men and women. The latter are mainly incorporated in export-oriented textile production and agribusiness operations, which appear to be based on stereotypical views regarding female characteristics and skills. Yet by providing women with access to income and social networks and by increasing their agency, employment in these enterprises may challenge the male breadwinner–female housewife model. Focusing on women’s work in textile assembly plants in rural Mexico, Arlette Covarrubias discusses how social norms relating to ‘appropriate’ gender roles may be enforced through different mechanisms in order to prevent married women from engaging in salaried employment.

Rural social, religious and political institutions have also relied on specific concepts regarding gender roles and have shaped gender relationships within communities and households. The context of migration challenges such ‘cultural certainties’. Using the example of the Bolivian Aymara, Andrea Blumtritt analyses changes in the gendered participation in an indigenous path of duties, the so-called thakhi. These changes reflect the renegotiation and transformation of gender roles and concepts from an emic perspective.

The five articles in this collection demonstrate that as rural regions of Latin America undergo processes of transformation, gender roles and relations are similarly not static, but are subject to negotiation and, in some cases, redefinition. Such changes may be associated with increased power of rural women, such as reflected in the case of women’s increased access and control over land in the Colombian Andes. However, persisting social and cultural norms may limit the space for women’s empowerment, as illustrated by the example of women’s participation in salaried employment in two Mexican towns. In other cases, a redefinition of a rural gender model may benefit men more than women, as is reflected in the case of the thakhi in Bolivia.

‘External’ institutions operating in rural areas also influence the dynamics of rural gender relations. On the one hand, they may reinforce existing gender roles, as demonstrated by the examples of public health institutions and schools in rural Mexico. On the other hand, institutions, such as NGOs working with rural women, may strengthen women’s status and sense of self-worth and facilitate changes in rural gender relations.

References

