

ORIGINAL

Documentary Analysis of Public Policies with a Gender Perspective in Rural Territories of Ecuador: Articulations between Health, Rights and Social Development

Análisis documental de políticas públicas con enfoque de género en territorios rurales del Ecuador: articulaciones entre salud, derechos y desarrollo social

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: gender-focused public policies have become increasingly relevant in global rural development agendas. However, in Ecuador, limited research has been conducted on how these policies are addressed in rural contexts from a social sciences perspective.

Method: qualitative, interpretative and analytical study was conducted through documentary research. A bibliographic search was carried out on the Scopus-Elsevier platform using the descriptor “public gender policies”, limited to scientific articles in the fields of social sciences, arts and humanities published between 2020 and 2025. A total of 3 624 articles were obtained and analysed using VOSviewer 1.6.20 software.

Results: the bibliometric maps identified several thematic clusters, with central nodes such as “gender equality”, “rural development”, “women”, “public health”, “intersectionality” and “policy implementation”. These concepts revealed significant gaps in literature related to local adaptation and territorial articulation of gender policies in rural settings.

Conclusions: the study evidenced a fragmented and heterogeneous academic approach to gender policies in rural Ecuadorian contexts. It highlighted the need to strengthen the theoretical and methodological integration of the rural perspective in gender policy analysis. The findings offer a foundational reference for future research and for the design of inclusive, context-sensitive public strategies.

Keywords: Public Policies; Gender Approach; Rural Territories; Social Rights; Public Health; Bibliometrics; Ecuador.

RESUMEN

Introducción: las políticas públicas con enfoque de género han cobrado protagonismo en las agendas de desarrollo rural a nivel global. No obstante, en Ecuador existe escasa producción investigativa que aborde su aplicación en contextos rurales desde una mirada de las ciencias sociales.

Método: se desarrolló un estudio cualitativo, interpretativo y de análisis documental. La búsqueda bibliográfica se realizó en la plataforma Scopus-Elsevier utilizando el descriptor “public gender policies”, limitada a artículos científicos de ciencias sociales, artes y humanidades publicados entre 2020 y 2025. Se obtuvieron 3 624 artículos que fueron analizados mediante el software VOSviewer 1.6.20.

Resultados: los mapas bibliométricos permitieron identificar diversos clústeres temáticos, destacando nodos centrales como “igualdad de género”, “desarrollo rural”, “mujeres”, “salud pública”, “interseccionalidad” y “aplicación de políticas”. Estos conceptos revelaron vacíos significativos en la literatura relacionados con la adaptación local y la articulación territorial de las políticas de género en zonas rurales.

Conclusiones: el estudio evidenció un abordaje académico fragmentado y poco articulado sobre las políticas de género en contextos rurales ecuatorianos. Se remarcó la necesidad de fortalecer la integración teórica y metodológica de la perspectiva rural en los análisis de políticas públicas. Los hallazgos ofrecen una base referencial para futuras investigaciones y para el diseño de estrategias públicas inclusivas y contextualizadas.

Palabras clave: Políticas Públicas; Enfoque de Género; Territorios Rurales; Derechos Sociales; Salud Pública; Bibliometría; Ecuador.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the international agenda has undergone a significant shift towards gender equality as a guiding principle in the design and implementation of public policies. Multilateral organizations such as UN Women, the World Bank and the OECD have promoted regulatory frameworks and recommendations that encourage the inclusion of a cross-cutting gender approach at all levels of state planning.^(1,2,3) Countries such as Sweden, Canada and New Zealand have been widely recognized for their gender-sensitive public policies, both for their scope and their ability to adapt to territorial and cultural particularities.^(4,5,6) In Sweden, for example, a gender-responsive budgeting system has been developed that not only assesses the differentiated impact of fiscal measures but also corrects structural imbalances based on data disaggregated by sex and ethnicity.⁽⁷⁾

In East Asia, South Korea has implemented mixed models of social policy planning and monitoring that integrate gender indicators in areas such as rural employment, reproductive health and intercultural education, allowing for an intersectional view of state action.⁽⁸⁾ At the European level, experiences such as those in Spain and Finland have included sustained training strategies for civil servants on equality issues, promoting strong and sustained institutional capacities over time.⁽⁹⁾

These policies have not emerged spontaneously, but rather from a systematic recognition of historical gaps, as well as from political will supported by rigorous empirical studies and accountability mechanisms.⁽¹⁰⁾ Latin America, albeit at different paces and with varying nuances, has also made progress towards the design of public policies with a gender perspective, especially since the adoption of the Belém do Pará Convention. Countries such as Mexico, Chile, Colombia and Argentina have consolidated legal frameworks that incorporate principles of substantive equality and social justice from the central levels to rural and peripheral territories. In the case of Mexico, the National Strategy for Equality between Women and Men contemplates differentiated actions in rural indigenous areas, recognizing the vulnerability of women in contexts of multiple exclusion.^(4,11,12) Chile, for its part, has developed comprehensive policies on gender-based violence that prioritize access to quality public services in rural areas, ensuring coverage and intercultural training for technical teams.^(5,13,14)

Despite regional dynamism, significant structural challenges remain in Ecuador to consolidate gender-focused public policies, especially in rural areas. Although the 2008 Constitution recognizes gender equality and the right to live a life free of violence, the effective implementation of these principles has been limited by multiple factors. These include poor inter-institutional coordination, weak decentralization, limited community participation in policy design, and a statistical system that is still insufficient to capture local realities. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census (2024), in rural areas of the country, 34,7 % of women continue to face systematic barriers to accessing basic health, education, or justice services, exacerbated by conditions of poverty, ethnicity, or territorial isolation.^(15,16)

From an empirical standpoint, several indicators underscore the scale of the problem and its territorial grounding. The International Monetary Fund reports persistent gaps in labour-force participation and earnings between women and men in Ecuador, with cumulative effects on formal employment and women's economic security, particularly in rural areas.⁽²⁾ Recent evidence for the country also shows that lockdown shocks disproportionately increased female unemployment and job instability relative to men, with sharper impacts among households with lower social protection.⁽¹⁷⁾ In terms of political representation, gender quota mechanisms have raised the number of female candidacies, yet electoral performance remains below parity, with wider disparities at subnational levels.⁽¹⁵⁾ Within education, the persistence of gender stereotypes and institutionally weak responses to diversity continue to hinder substantive equality.⁽¹⁶⁾ Taken together, these indicators move the debate beyond normative commitments and point to material and symbolic gaps that constrain the territorial implementation of gender-focused public policies.

In provinces such as Manabí, this reality becomes even more pressing. In the canton of Portoviejo, gender inequalities are manifested not only in socioeconomic indicators, but also in the invisibility of rural women as political subjects in local planning. Despite the existence of cantonal ordinances that invoke gender equality, their concrete application is diluted in the institutional apparatus, often due to a lack of technical training or political will. At the Technical University of Manabí (UTM), although research on gender has been promoted from different disciplines, there has been no systematic, comprehensive and specific review of gender-focused

public policies applied to rural areas in Ecuador.

This absence is not insignificant. The truth is that, if the way in which public policies are addressing or failing to address the gender dimension in rural contexts is not thoroughly researched and analysed, there is a risk of perpetuating an epistemological and political gap that undermines efforts to achieve social justice. Ignorance not only limits state action: it also reproduces dynamics of exclusion. If this academic and technical gap continues to be ignored, rural women in Ecuador will continue to be passive recipients of disconnected policies designed in urban centres and far removed from their specific needs. In this sense, the need to carry out this study is not a response to a research trend, but rather an ethical and academic call to understand, document and highlight a latent problem.

Given this complex and still largely unexplored scenario, a key question emerged that guided this work:

Research Question: how has the gender approach been addressed in public policies aimed at rural contexts in Ecuador?

Objective: to analyse the approach to gender-focused public policies in rural contexts in Ecuador, based on a documentary review of studies indexed in Scopus, with the aim of identifying trends, research gaps, and relevant contributions from the social sciences, arts, and humanities.

METHOD

Research Focus

This study was framed within a qualitative interpretive approach, given that its purpose was not to quantitatively measure reality, but rather to understand the deeper meaning of gender-focused public policies based on the discourses, categories, and patterns emerging in specialized literature. The qualitative approach allowed us to explore complex phenomena from a subjective perspective, considering the contexts, trajectories and meanings attributed by the actors or, in this case, by the documentary sources. This approach was particularly appropriate, as the analysis focused on the interpretation of scientific studies and documents with theoretical value on the reality of rural areas, and on how these sources address or obscure the gender component.⁽¹⁸⁾ An inductive logic of reading and reorganizing knowledge was chosen, in which the findings were not forced into pre-existing categories, but rather constructed from the data and their semantic interrelationships. This choice also responded to an academic intention to recognize the nuances, tensions and omissions present in discourses on gender and public policy.

Type of research

The research adopted a documentary design with an analytical-bibliographic orientation. This type of study was ideal for addressing problems that require exploring and reconstructing the state of knowledge from highly specialized secondary sources. Documentary studies allow for the integration, comparison, and systematization of scattered scientific information, offering an overview that enables critical and proactive interpretations. The combination of a rigorous documentary approach with a deep hermeneutic analysis made it possible to generate a sensitive, dense, and well-founded approach to the issue under study.⁽¹⁹⁾

Research sources

Both primary and secondary sources were used. The primary sources corresponded to current public policies in Ecuador, especially those related to rural development and gender equality, which were retrieved from official websites of state institutions, such as the Ministry of Women and Human Rights, the Technical Secretariat for Planning, and the Ministry of Agriculture.^(12,15) Secondary sources consisted of scientific articles indexed in the Scopus-Elsevier database. These studies were selected for their methodological quality, level of impact and thematic relevance, as they directly or indirectly addressed the gender approach in the field of rural public policy. This combination of sources made it possible to contrast the institutional regulatory framework with the theoretical and empirical framework of international scientific production.⁽²⁰⁾

Techniques and instruments

Information was collected using a systematic, transparent, and replicable document review technique. The main tool was a digital bibliographic file specifically designed to record and organise the articles selected from the Scopus Preview-Elsevier platform, taking into account variables such as: year of publication, country of origin, type of study, keywords, main findings, thematic categories and relevance to the issue under investigation.⁽²¹⁾ The search term was 'public gender policies', applied within the Elsevier search engine. The strategy was limited to scientific articles published between 2020 and 2025 in the areas of social sciences, arts, and humanities. The initial universe yielded a total of 3 624 articles, from which a significant sample was selected considering relevance, repetition of key terms, citation level, and thematic connection to rural contexts.

Results analysis technique

The data was processed in two interconnected phases. In the first phase, VOSviewer version 1.6.20 software was used, a tool specialized in bibliometric analysis and the visualizations of semantic networks.⁽²²⁾ This tool enabled us to construct maps of co-occurrences between key terms, grouped into clusters of meaning. Graphical visualization facilitated the identification of dense thematic nuclei, conceptual relationships and emerging fields on gender and public policy over the last five years. In the second phase, a hermeneutic analysis was applied, focusing on the interpretation of the meanings constructed by the articles, as well as on the absences or silences present in the texts. This analysis was accompanied by a critical reading of the visual patterns identified in VOSviewer, which were subsequently contrasted with Ecuadorian regulatory documents. Qualitative hermeneutics facilitated the reconstruction of meanings from the texts, recognizing the cultural, political and historical mediations that run through them.^(2,23) Finally, a theoretical and methodological triangulation was carried out, integrating the results of the software with the conceptual review of the primary sources, to ensure the internal coherence and rigor of the study. This triangulation made it possible not only to describe trends, but also to argue about theoretical gaps, practical limitations, and analytical opportunities surrounding the gender approach in rural public policies.

RESULTS

The co-occurrence network in figure 1 highlights a red cluster with terms such as gender, gender relations, gender equality, and intersectionality. This cluster reflects the centrality of gender issues in the literature, linked to structural inequalities and human rights. Yet, most studies focus on urban or global contexts, with little attention to rural areas. The link between public policy and gender disparity suggests interest in access gaps, but with limited reference to rural Ecuador.

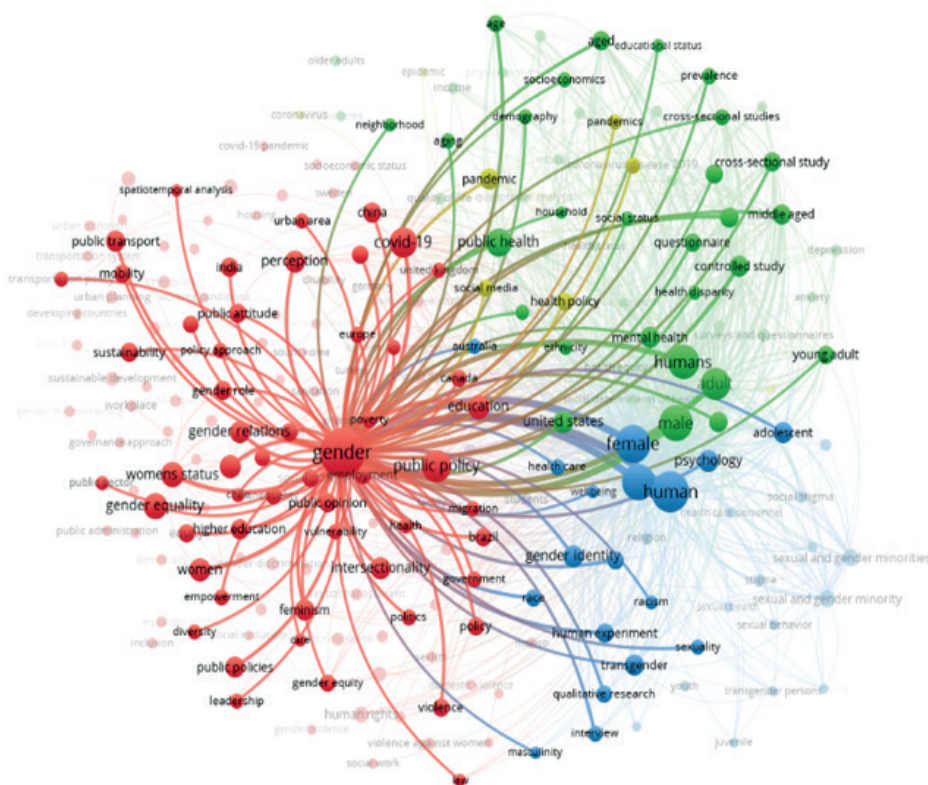


Figure 1. Main network of co-occurrences on gender and public policies

Figure 2 shows a green cluster related to public health, pandemic, mental health, questionnaire, and cross-sectional study. The results confirm that COVID-19 became a core axis of scientific production on gender and public policy. Most works were quantitative and cross-sectional, useful for measuring impacts but insufficient to capture lived experiences of women in rural zones. The absence of Ecuador-focused research reveals a clear gap on how rural communities managed the health crisis and related policies.

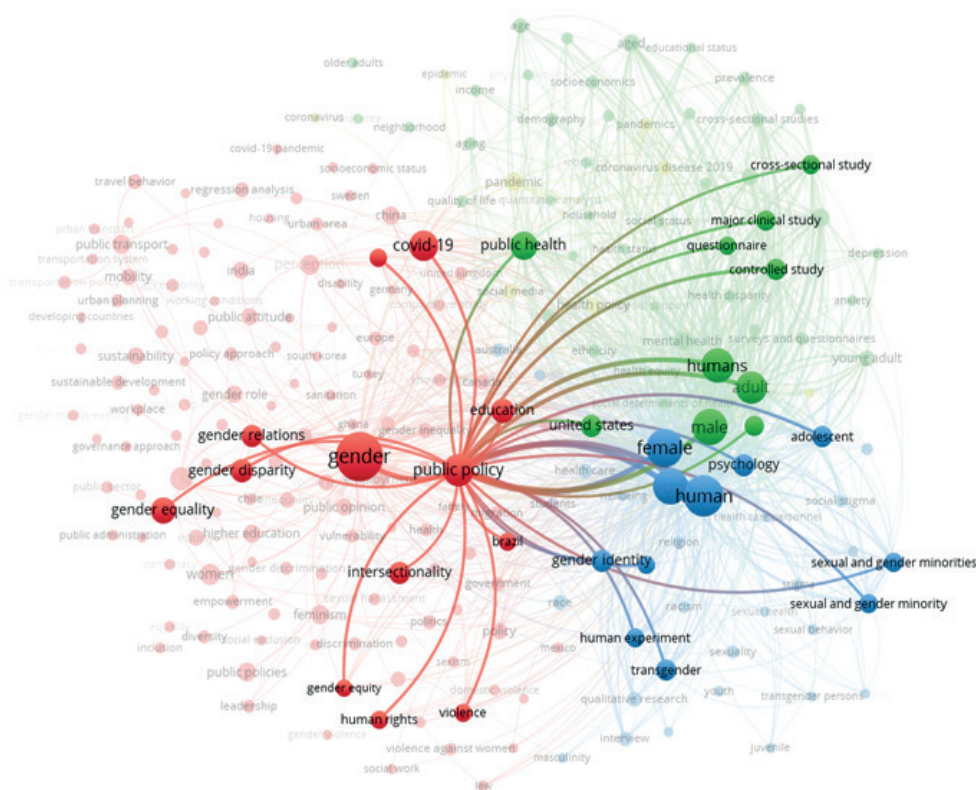


Figure 2. The structural centrality of public policy as a connecting axis

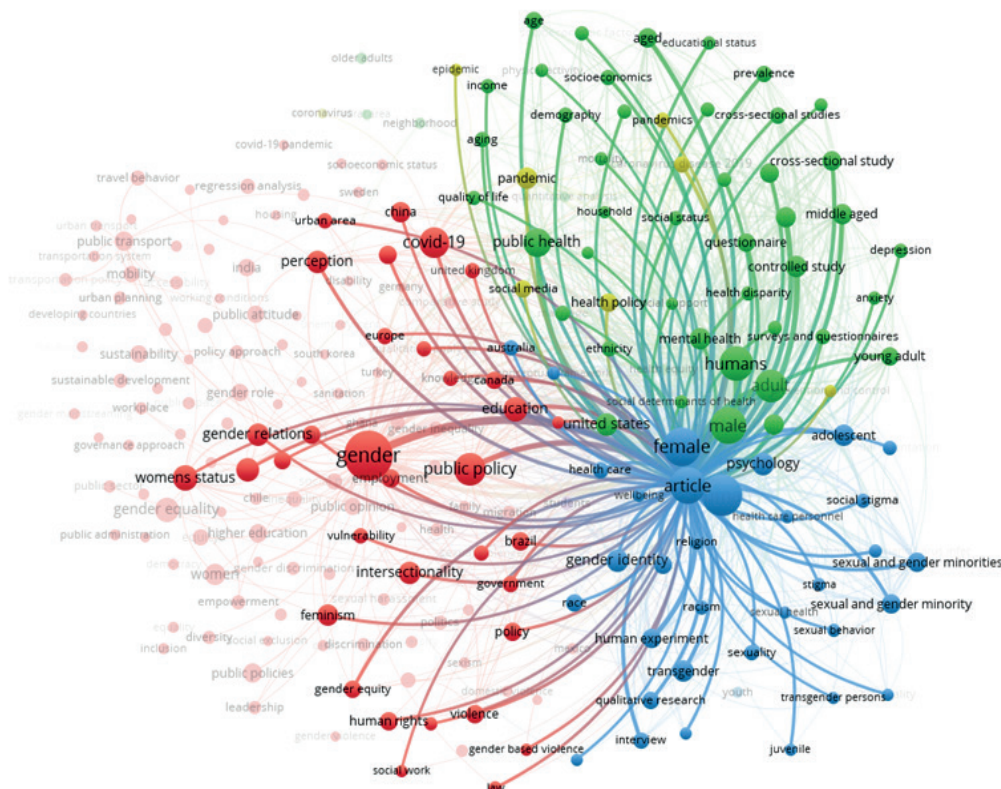


Figure 3. The hegemony of the biomedical and the displacement of gender

Figure 3 presents two additional clusters. The blue cluster groups terms like female, male, human, psychology, and gender identity, reflecting growing interest in identity, sexual diversity, and psychological well-being. However, this line of research is stronger in the Global North, with little representation in Latin America or

Ecuador. The yellow cluster contains terms such as income, socioeconomics, and educational status. Although peripheral, it suggests that socioeconomic factors significantly influence access to policies and programmes. Still, its low density indicates that these variables have been treated as secondary rather than central in rural contexts.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of public policies with a gender perspective in rural contexts of Ecuador revealed persistent gaps that expose the complexity of social processes and the urgency of adopting intersectional approaches. The findings showed that, despite the existence of national frameworks promoting gender equality, the implementation in rural territories remains limited due to structural, cultural, and organisational barriers that constrain effectiveness. This result is consistent with Posligua-Acosta et al., who argue that the inclusion of gender in public policies faces barriers linked to historical inequalities and a lack of resources to materialise goals.^(7,24) The bibliometric mapping highlighted that most studies focus on urban areas and institutional contexts with greater visibility, while rural spaces remain underrepresented. This supports Arteaga Mueses and Betancourt Sánchez, who point out that academic research often privileges scenarios of higher visibility, neglecting peripheral communities.⁽²⁵⁾ By identifying this absence, the study contributes to showing the need for more research grounded in rural realities in order to design differentiated and context-sensitive policies.

The co-occurrence network of keywords demonstrated that concepts such as “gender equity”, “rural development” and “public policies” emerged as central nodes in the literature. However, their links with categories such as technological innovation, citizen participation and sustainability appeared weak. This fragmentation reflects the lack of multidisciplinary integration, limiting the capacity of policies to respond to complex inequalities. As stated by UNESCO, such fragmentation diminishes the potential for policies to address the multidimensional nature of rural inequalities.^(21,26) Therefore, the findings align with the recommendation to strengthen articulation between disciplines and perspectives, especially in vulnerable contexts. The cluster analysis generated through VOSviewer indicated that red clusters were mainly related to governance and women’s participation in community structures, while blue clusters grouped studies on rural education and health programmes. Although this segmentation clarifies thematic focuses, it reflects dispersed efforts and the absence of integral approaches. According to Cevallos and Zambrano, policies that lack integrality often produce fragmented interventions that replicate rather than reduce inequalities.⁽²⁷⁾ From this perspective, the interpretation of results highlights that addressing gender in rural areas requires a holistic approach that integrates education, health, and political participation.

A comparative analysis with other Latin American contexts shows similar trends. Studies in Mexico and Peru report that, despite legal advances, rural communities still face obstacles to accessing inclusive policies due to limited infrastructure, centralisation of services, and cultural resistances. These findings indicate that the Ecuadorian case is not isolated but forms part of a broader regional phenomenon. Such evidence underlines the importance of coordinated regional actions to strengthen gender-sensitive rural policies and ensure their effective implementation. The triangulation of results, literature and theoretical framework confirms that the linkage between gender perspective and rural development is still under construction. While some studies highlight progress in including women in community programmes, the bibliometric and co-occurrence analyses showed that research on sustainability, innovation and new governance practices is still incipient. These results coincide with authors who emphasise the importance of integrating science, technology and community participation as key elements to build equitable and sustainable rural development.^(14,21,28)

Taken together, the discussion highlights that advances in the design of gender-sensitive public policies coexist with structural and epistemological limitations in their application. The underrepresentation of rural communities in academic research, the fragmentation of approaches and the weak connection between gender, sustainability and innovation emerge as major challenges. These findings reaffirm the relevance of this study by making visible both the gaps in knowledge and practice, and by offering an analytical framework that can guide future research and policy interventions to reduce inequalities in rural Ecuador.

CONCLUSION

The analysis confirmed that gender-oriented public policies in rural Ecuador remain uneven and fragmented, reflecting a persistent gap between regulatory frameworks and their effective implementation. The study answered the stated objective by showing that, despite institutional efforts to mainstream gender perspectives, significant limitations persist in the articulation of social sciences, community practices, and state programmes. As an abstraction of the findings, it is evident that addressing gender in rural areas requires moving beyond partial views and advancing towards a comprehensive understanding that integrates social, cultural, and productive dimensions. The academic production indexed in international databases revealed a growing but still insufficient interest in exploring inequalities in peripheral territories. In summary, the study provides a critical and multidisciplinary perspective that highlights the need to rethink the design and assessment of public

policies, positioning the gender approach as a structural axis rather than a secondary or accessory component.

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