

To Kill an Animal, To Make a Man: Speciesism, Domination, and Masculinity in Ecuador

Matar al animal, forjar al hombre: especismo, dominación y masculinidad en Ecuador

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Abstract

This article analyses the construction of masculinities in men who kill animals in Ecuador, examining 11 in-depth interviews with Ecuadorian cockfighters, bullfighters and slaughterhouse workers. The main findings of this study focus on the psychosocial and ideological conditioning that underlie the construction of male social identities immersed in practices of animal exploitation. Masculinity, conditioned by the human-animal relationship, is found to be built based on prestige, homosociality, and competitiveness among cockfighters, while the superimposition of the fear of death is an important symbol of rationality and male power for bullfighters. For slaughterers, eco-

conomic need is the main factor that shapes their masculinity. The article explores how domination and violence shape masculinities through a comparative analysis of the lived experiences of cockfighters, bullfighters, and slaughterhouse workers in Ecuador.

Keywords: masculinities; interspecies habitus; bullfighters; cockfighters; slaughterhouse workers; Ecuador

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la construcción de las masculinidades de hombres que matan animales en Ecuador y para ello examina once entrevistas en profundidad con galleros, toreros y trabajadores de matadero ecuatorianos. Los principales hallazgos de este estudio se centran en el condicionamiento psicosocial e ideológico que subyace a la construcción de identidades sociales masculinas inmersas en prácticas de explotación animal. Se encuentra que la masculinidad, condicionada por la relación humano-animal, se construye sobre la base del prestigio, la homosocialidad y la competitividad entre los galleros, mientras que para los toreros la superación del miedo a la muerte es un símbolo importante de racionalidad y poder masculino. Para los trabajadores de mataderos, la necesidad económica es el principal factor que configura su masculinidad. El artículo explora cómo la dominación y la violencia moldean las masculinidades a través de un análisis comparativo de las experiencias vividas por galleros, toreros y trabajadores de mataderos en Ecuador.

Palabras clave: masculinidades; habitus interespecie; toreros; galleros; trabajadores de mataderos; Ecuador

1. Introduction

Research on masculinities in Latin America can be traced through three key moments. The first, identified by Mara Viveros (1997), reflects on the region's emerging theoretical production, emphasising themes such as masculine identity construction, the intersections of gender, class, and ethnicity, and the effects of women's social changes on male subjectivity, as well as male sexuality and reproductive roles. Two decades later, Aguayo and Nascimento (2016) outlined three dominant analytical frameworks: violence, fatherhood, and LGBTQ+ diversity, stressing the need for further research to capture the cultural and historical specificity of diverse masculinities.

The most recent contribution comes from Juan Carlos Cervantes (2024), who reviews thirty years of regional scholarship. He identifies ongoing theoretical limitations in the field, including scarcity of empirical research, insufficient scientific rigor, and limited openness to critique and self-reflection. In this dynamic field of study, and within the

context of Latin American scholarship, we aim to describe and analyse the relationship between masculinities and speciesist violence—an issue that has yet to be thoroughly problematised.

From the field of gender studies and feminist animal studies, the relationship has been theoretically established between the configuration of speciesism and the patriarchal values of traditional masculinity, such as rationality, to the detriment of emotions, domination, power and control (Adams, 1990, 1991; Gaard, 2002). Historically, it has mainly been lesbian feminisms that have problematised the interplay between speciesist violence and heteropatriarchy (Gaard, 2002). Different ecofeminist and feminist anti-speciesist currents, both in North and South America, have pointed out the convergence of these systems and structures of oppression and, therefore, the analytical and methodological need to study animality and animalisation from a feminist and decolonial perspective (Davidson, 2021; González, 2021; Ponce León, 2024a).

These research agendas have raised gender differences in human-animal relationships. It has been found that men tend to participate more in hunting, animal abuse and cruelty, as well as bestiality (Herzog, 2007), and tend to support, to a greater extent than women, different forms of animal instrumentalisation (Knight et al., 2004). It has also been found that men tend to use mechanisms to justify animal exploitation that are related to traditional masculinity, including emotional restriction, strength, and domination (Rothgerber, 2013).

Men who abstain from eating meat are perceived as less masculine (Ponce León, 2020b; Ruby & Heine, 2011). Men who identify with alternative forms of masculinity tend to consume less meat, show lower levels of attachment to meat consumption, are more willing to reduce their meat intake, and express more positive attitudes toward vegetarians (De Backer et al., 2020). It has been found that vegan men are relegated and subordinated, even in spaces of left-wing militancy (Ponce León, 2020b). However, the literature has also questioned the patriarchal dividends and the complicity of vegan men with the prevailing gender order (Ponce León, 2020b), associating them with a kind of “hybrid masculinity” (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018), which, at the same time as questioning the norm, reproduces current schemes of oppression. Even so, these studies, both theoretical and empirical, indicate a marked masculinisation of the exercise of speciesist violence.

These studies allow us to locate a psychosocial process of genderisation of interspecies relations and practices of animal exploitation and, in turn, propose articulations with other forms of prejudice and discrimination. This premise is supported by empirical research that has found a link between hegemonic masculinity, social dominance, and the pre-

disposition to support animal exploitation (Dhont et al., 2014; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Rothgerber, 2013)¹⁴; Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Rothgerber, 2013). In summary, the theoretical approach in this article is based on the analytical overlapping between (hegemonic) masculinity and animal exploitation.

It is important to clarify the analytical scope of this study. While the article engages critically with speciesist violence and human-animal relations, its primary focus is not the animal as a moral or legal subject, nor the analysis of animal sentience per se. Rather, the empirical and theoretical emphasis lies on the construction of human masculinities through practices that involve the domination and killing of animals. In this sense, the article is situated primarily within the fields of anthropology and sociology of masculinities, rather than within animal law or animal welfare studies. Animals appear here as relational figures through which masculine identities are produced, legitimised, and contested, rather than as the central analytical subject. Explicitly stating this positioning allows us to avoid conflating distinct analytical agendas and to foreground the specific contribution of this research to masculinity studies.

Located in the literature and the problematisations mentioned above, and articulating and bringing together our lines of research, this article analyses the construction of the masculinities of men who kill animals in Ecuador. Within this framework, we aim to problematise the mechanisms through which domination and violence shape masculine identities in relation to power (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2018, 2020)—specifically, the masculinities of cockfighters, bullfighters, and slaughterhouse workers. To this end, we conduct a thorough comparative analysis of interviews with individuals from each of these groups. We understand *interspecies habitus* as the embodied dispositions through which masculinities are produced in relation to non-human animals.

The article is divided into five sections. The first outlines the methodological procedures. The second, third, and fourth sections offer an analytical account of the forms of masculinity shaped by the experiences of cockfighters, bullfighters, and slaughterhouse workers, respectively. The fifth section presents the conclusions and proposes a theoretical reflection—still in progress—that explores how interspecies male domination is reproduced. Drawing on Connell (1997) and rereading Messerschmidt's (2018) reformulation of hegemonic masculinity, we engage with the notion of *interspecies hegemonic masculinity* as part of a broader reflection on what we call the *interspecies habitus*.

2. Method

2.1. Study design

This qualitative study explored the experiences of Ecuadorian men working in professions that involve direct violence against animals. The sample comprised eleven participants aged between 40 and 73 years (mean age = 50.90). The participants included bullfighters, cockfighters, and slaughterhouse workers. Bullfighters and cockfighters were socialised into their profession from early childhood, except for one bullfighter who began at 21 years of age, as illustrated in Table 1.

Both these groups represented middle to upper-middle socioeconomic status. In contrast, slaughterhouse workers came from highly impoverished backgrounds and started their trade as early as 12 years old. Participants were selected based on the principles of theoretical sampling (Becker, 2009; Charmaz, 2006), with an analytical focus on men whose professions involve direct animal violence in the Ecuadorian context.

Table 1. Sample composition

Participants	Type of killing	Age	Starting age
A. S	Bullfighting	40 years	9 years
M. C	Bullfighting	40 years	Early childhood
G. A	Bullfighting	52 years	21 years
L. N	Slaughtering	54 years	18 years
V. G	Slaughtering	67 years	24 years
M. N	Slaughtering	48 years	15 years
H. G	Slaughtering	32 years	12 years
A. M	Cockfighting	47 years	7 years
E. J	Cockfighting	54 years	Early childhood
G. L	Cockfighting	73 years	Early childhood
J. P	Cockfighting	53 years	Early childhood

2.2. Sampling and recruitment

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling due to difficulties accessing individuals in these professions (Naderifar et al., 2017). Initial contact was made through phone calls, during which the first author introduced the study and invited participation. The selection aimed to capture a broad range of experiences related to different forms of ani-

mal killings across the three professions: bullfighting, cockfighting, and slaughterhouse work.

2.3. Data collection

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews. Each interview focused on the participant's life experience and trajectory in their profession, with particular emphasis on the emotions and moral feelings surrounding human-animal relationships inherent to their work. In-depth interviewing is an intensive process that limits the voice of the researchers (Sarantakos, 2013) and gives prominence to the participants, enabling flexibility and the collection of high-quality information. The interviews were thus conducted as open, non-directive conversations, beginning with open introductory questions such as: "How did you start in your profession?" and "What are your most significant memories of entering this trade?". This approach allowed the first author of this study, who conducted the interviews and designed the research as part of his doctoral thesis, to receive spontaneous responses, which were later thematised to develop and continually adjust interview guidelines.

The interviews took place in settings chosen by the participants, and in three cases, they were conducted via video calls. The interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours, were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and fully transcribed. The interview guide focused on the participants' professional history, experiences with animals, and perceptions of their work.

2.4. Data analysis

The coding process was conducted by the three authors of the article, who independently analysed and compared data to develop a comprehensive analytical description of each case. Regular team meetings ensured consistency in coding and interpretation, employing constant comparative methods to refine emerging themes. The three authors were responsible for refining the analysis of empirical data through theoretical triangulation. They engaged in a comparative coding process and category development, which was synthesised in the joint drafting of the results. The team decided that thematic saturation was achieved after conducting interviews with the eleven participants when no new themes emerged during data analysis.

2.5. *Researcher reflexivity and positionality statement*

The researchers approached this study from diverse academic and professional backgrounds, which shaped our perspectives and influenced the research process. The first author is a clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, and PhD in Social Psychology with extensive experience in human–animal relationships, whose critical perspective on violence and ethics shaped the study design and data collection. The second author is a professor of sociology and gender studies specialising in social inequality, power dynamics, and gender-based violence, contributing a critical analysis of gender, power, and the normalization of violence. The third author is a PhD candidate researching gender, veganism, and decoloniality, whose focus on critical animal studies and decolonial theory informed the study's ethical and political framework.

Together, we acknowledged that our respective positions as researchers shaped the analysis and interpretation of the data. We employed a reflexive approach throughout the research process, recognising the potential for our positionalities to influence the study. Field notes and regular team discussions were used to critically assess our biases and ensure that the participants' voices remained at the centre of the analysis. Our interdisciplinary backgrounds in sociology, social psychology, critical animal studies, feminist and decolonial theories enriched the interpretation and permitted a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences in relation to violence against animals.

2.6. *Ethical considerations*

The Research Ethics Committee of the first author's university approved the study prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the nature, purpose, and potential impact of the research during the first contact and again at the start of the interviews. Their participation was voluntary, and verbal consent was obtained and recorded before each interview. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising personal identifiers in the transcripts and reporting.

3. Results

3.1. *Cockfighting: manhood, prestige and homosociality*

This section will analyse the experiences of the cockfighters in terms of masculinity and the relationships established with the animality of the

gamecocks. The interaction between men and gamecocks in the context of fighting reveals a complex network of meanings in the construction of masculinity, where competition, camaraderie and honour are intertwined. It will also examine how the cockfighters project aspects of their masculine identity onto the gamecocks, considering them as extensions of themselves, and how this relationship with animality reinforces and naturalises notions of gender within the cockfighting culture.

3.1.1. *Competitiveness, social status and masculine prestige*

Cockpits are hyper-masculinised spaces where relationships between men configure dynamics of complicity and fraternity, according to A. M: “Look, here I would even talk of a certain complicity, as should happen between very close friends”. Similarly, E. J describes a type of *compadrazgo*, mediated by solidarity and honesty: “Cockfighters really are one family regardless of nationality. If you are a cockfighter, and I am a cockfighter, and we see each other, we will surely give each other a hug (...) we always offer sincere friendship and we always speak the truth”.

These statements identify a type of recognition and symbolic rewards among men associated with the status of being a cockfighter, which is especially important for those who, due to their class position, cannot obtain prestige through other social fields (Foster, 1975). Therefore, cockfights operate not only as a place for betting, but also for the exchange of favours and benefits for these men, through symbolic and emotional transactions that go beyond the economic, related to what Connell (2003) called “patriarchal dividends”.

Highly competitive dynamics are also recognised, which establish relationships of subordination between “good cockfighters” and “bad cockfighters”, determined by the type of gamecock they are capable of “creating”, and between “poor” and “rich” cockfighters, characterised by how much money they can bet. Here, Connell’s (2003) concept of “hegemonic masculinity” is analytically important, since the way in which gender is structured as a social practice among men implies not only the relations of complicity and the patriarchal dividends mentioned above, but also relations of marginality and subordination among the men. The cockfighters thus find themselves in a dynamic that requires them to permanently defend their manhood, associated with their status and prestige, which is disputed in every fight.

In this way, cockfights demand a process of male socialisation, putting into play not only the torture and death of animals, but also patriarchal mandates that defend a certain type of *machismo*. This can be defined as the cult of virility, characterised by exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in interpersonal relationships between men,

and arrogance and sexual aggression in relationships between men and women (Stevens, 1973), and from the field of Critical Animal Studies, is added a type of virility that is affirmed not only among men, and between men and women, but between men and non-human animals. Therefore, in the cockpits, the hegemonic masculine ideal is performed (Geertz, 1972; Jones, 2010; Young, 2017), mediated by the pride and good name associated with the social prestige and recognition of being a cockfighter, and the rivalry between peers permanently disputing their own virility through interspecies relations with the gamecocks, establishing relationships of subordination between the cockfighters.

3.1.2. *Homosociality and eroticism among cockfighters*

Linked to the above, the *compadrazgo* between cockfighters implies spaces of homosociality, conditioned by admiration and solidarity between peers. Owning a good gamecock is a symbol of distinction and works as a social catalyst in the cockpit. This confirms the postulate of Dundes (1994) which presents cockfights as a symbolic space of homoeroticism. As the cockfighter J. P. remarks:

The manhood of cockfighters is like that: manliness and camaraderie, yes, I say that. You know that in friendship you rely on each other. We decide which cockpits we are going to go to (...), there you can see their horseplay, their jokes, the smiles, the anecdotes being passed around. I tell you, that is because manhood is not just to say, I have two balls, to be able to live. No, I tell you, yes, manhood is made up of so many things: responsibility, word, work and honesty, it's the man as a whole.

This homoeroticisation of relationships between cockfighters also implies processes of feminisation, both of the “bad cockfighters” and of the gamecocks, affirming certain dividends and patriarchal pacts that configure the masculine subjectivity of the cockfighter. Going back to Kalof et al., (2004), in the so-called “blood sports”, a displacement of heteropatriarchal relations occurs between humans and animals. This process is understood through the marked anthropomorphisation of the animal and the projective identification of the cockfighter in the gamecock. As A. M. remarks:

I think that, in the long run, and I see this in different breeders, gamecocks are a bit of a reflection of your personality. You are imprinting a little of yourself on what you are handling. In the long run, there is an artificial selection in the crossbreeding, at least for those who already have formed a criterion about this. You develop a gamecock with something in the end that reflects on you.

On my part, there is a great admiration towards gamecocks, but I have friends who breed and look for the edge; the tallest gamecock, the strongest gamecock, others look for the fastest, others look for the most defensive gamecocks. I try to see a braver gamecock, which is also pleasant to look at, has good plumage, has quality, that is, a fine gamecock.

This remark allows us to locate the projection of the cockfighter in the gamecock as a characterological and aesthetic reflection of the former that, according to the prevailing gender mandates, requires bravery as a core element of masculine personality, and a “good appearance”. This projection simulates not only the masculine subjectivity of the cockfighters, but the entire social matrix of this group (Geertz, 1972). This is a blood sport (Kalof, 2014), where sexual virility and relationships between men configure a symbolic scenario that demands a type of “masculine balance”, and requires compensating gender practices associated with the feminine—such as care—which in this case must affirm the ideal of hegemonic masculinity and reinforce a superior status among cockfighters (Young, 2017). This means that “caring” activity is only possible for men in a war scenario, which affirms traditional masculinity.

This “caring” implies a type of artificial selection that represents a practice of biopower, where choices are arbitrarily made about the lives of these animals (Ponce León & Ávila Gaitán, 2024). This administration of life, mainly genetic in type, according to the transcript above, is perfected over time through cockfighters who have “formed a criterion”, in such a way that breeding and care—a traditionally feminine practice—appear here as a masculine exercise that reinforces the social status of a good cockfighter. This hybridisation of masculinity (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018), with its corresponding compensation (Young, 2017), the “care” practices of which have ultimately warlike purposes, is possible in this specific space of homosociality and homoeroticism among cockfighters.

3.2. Bullfighting: spectacle, death and masculinity

Next, we will examine how these practices contribute in bullfighting to the construction of a masculinity based on violence and the domination of bulls, as well as the defence of national tradition as part of masculine identity. Additionally, we will highlight how cultural representations around bullfighting reinforce gender norms and perpetuate the subordination of animals in the name of entertaining spectacles and tradition.

3.2.1. *Bullfighters: the public spectacle of masculinity*

To this end, we will concentrate on the set of interviews carried out with the bullfighters. Through an approach focused on the symbolic construction of the bull as a representative figure of virility—present in similar ways in the three interviews—it is necessary to consider the emphasis on the intersectionality between the system of animal oppression and the various forms of intra-human oppression, such as gender and sexuality oppression. This intersection between oppressions gives rise to a “sex-species system” where the superiority of the Human¹ is equated with that called the masculine (Francica, 2020).

From Raewyn Connell’s (1997) perspective, hegemonic masculinity is not only that which holds power but also that which hierarchically structures other forms of masculinity and femininity. In bullfighting, hegemonic masculinity is materialised in the figure of the bullfighter, who embodies dominance, bravery, and rationality. The bull, on the other hand, is a paradigmatic case of subordinated masculinity: although portrayed as a strong and aggressive opponent, its fate is sealed by its ritualised defeat. The subordination of the bull reinforces the supremacy of the bullfighter while naturalising violence as a mechanism for regulating hierarchies.

In this context, bullfights can be understood as a space where patriarchal dividends are generated (Connell, 1987), meaning the symbolic, material, and affective benefits that cis-heterosexual men obtain from the system of gender domination. The bullfighter’s victory over the bull reinforces his hegemonic masculine status and grants him prestige within a system that rewards violence as a mechanism of gender regulation. While the bull embodies subordinated masculinity destined for sacrifice, the bullfighter symbolically appropriates its strength, gaining recognition and legitimacy within his community.

This power structure is sustained, in part, by the colonial dichotomy between reason and emotion, which permeates bullfighting with a gendered bias. To participate in the bullfight as a bullfighter, one must control fear; to be a spectator, one must deactivate compassion. Both dispositions are constructed in opposition to what is perceived as feminine: fear for one’s own body, and empathy toward the suffering of others (Muñoz, 2004: 75).

However, from Wade’s perspective (1997), masculinity in bullfighting is also racialised. While the bullfighter embodies a virility associated with rationality and bodily control—elements traditionally linked to white colonial masculinity—the bull is represented as brute force, natu-

1. A capital letter is used since this represents the normative ideal of the Human, not the species *Homo sapiens*.

ralised and animalised, in a similar way to those in which Indigenous and Afro-descendant masculinities have been symbolised in Latin America's colonial history.

Thus, the interviewees reveal a reading of the bull in which it is not only masculinised but also racialised. This construction of masculinity is selective: the bull is recognised as strong and courageous only insofar as its defeat reinforces the bullfighter's authority. Its masculinity is, therefore, subordinated and racialised in its submission. This racialisation of the bull in bullfighting corresponds to a broader colonial logic in which certain bodies were relegated to the domain of animality and stripped of the status of gendered subjects. Following Lugones (2008), in colonial history, racialised people were not conceived as possessing gender but were instead reduced to sexed bodies, marked by brutality and excess. Like the bull in the bullfight, their existence was defined by their supposed incapacity for reason and their wildness, which justified their subordination and structural violence. So, bullfighting not only reaffirms the bullfighter's hegemonic masculinity but also reproduces a colonial order in which the animalised—whether human or not—must be controlled, subdued, or eliminated to sustain power hierarchies.

Following Canessa's (2012) analysis, this hierarchy among masculinities echoes how Indigenous men have historically been positioned within the colonial order as subaltern subjects: since they do not embody white hegemonic masculinity, they are represented as inferior, and their virility is perceived as incomplete or uncontrolled. Similarly, the masculinity of the bull in the bullfight is an artifice, being constructed as a worthy and wild adversary in order only to be defeated, transforming its resistance into a spectacle affirming hegemonic male power.

On the other hand, the spectacularisation of bullfighting as male domination over animality must be understood within the context of the appropriation of public space. Following Bourdieu (2010a) and Wade (2010), the division between public and private has historically been structured by patriarchy, positioning men in the realm of politics, economics, and society, while women and gender dissidents have been relegated to the domestic sphere. In this sense, the bullring is not just a stage for a battle between man and animal but a space where hegemonic masculinity is reaffirmed and celebrated as a public spectacle.

As bullfighter M.C. states:

The bull is there; maybe the conditions imposed by humans make it seem at a disadvantage, but the bull is there and can defend itself. The bull can injure and even kill, and that has happened. Having the privilege of killing a bull in a ring, in front of hundreds or thousands of people, comes at a certain price:

respecting the bull, respecting its integrity, ensuring it is a real bull, not one of those weak ones sometimes thrown into the ring.

The relationship between bullfighter and bull is not only one of confrontation but also of masculine complicity. The bull is a worthy opponent only insofar as it allows the bullfighter to demonstrate his skill and bravery. Masculinity is reinforced through shared violence and the possibility of overcoming death. As Vilella (2023) notes, complicity is one of the main characteristics of masculinities: mutual recognition among men within a patriarchal system solidifies hegemonic masculinity's dominance over all other forms of existence.

3.2.2. *Death and pardon*

The relationship between hegemonic and subordinated masculinity in bullfighting is also observed in the ritualised death of the bull. Within the patriarchal framework, subordinated masculinity is destined to be defeated, but in certain cases, it can be recognised and absorbed into the dominant structure. This is the case of the “*indulto*” (pardon), the act through which the audience and the bullring's president decide to spare the life of an exceptional bull.

The pardoned bull is not just any bull: it must have demonstrated a “worthy” level of bravery. In Connell's (1997) terms, this is a case of mobility within the hierarchy of masculinities. A bull that is sufficiently “brave” may escape its fate of death, but only to be repurposed as a breeding animal within the system of human exploitation. Its masculinity, in this case, is not completely rejected but rather assigned a productive value within “*ganadería brava*” (fighting bull breeding).

From Weismantel's (2001) perspective, the bullfight can be understood as a scenario where hegemonic masculinity is legitimised through the sacrifice of another life, reflecting colonial logics of domination and desire. The structure of the bullfighting spectacle reinforces the hierarchy in which the bullfighter, as the hegemonic masculine figure, has power over the life and death of the bull, regulating who is deemed worthy of continuing to exist within the system of exploitation. This logic is inscribed within a colonial order in which the ritual sacrifice of certain bodies is necessary to reaffirm the power of those who dominate, naturalising violence as an organising principle of both gender and species.

Bullfighter A.S. describes this process in his own words:

Because of that connection, that bull will die of old age with his harem of cows in the field, eating whatever he wants like a king, and you contributed to that. It's something very beautiful. I fought a magnificent bull, felt that it became

my friend, almost wanted to hug it, but obviously, you can't hug it because it would gore you. But the president didn't see it that way, so I had to kill it. At that moment, holding the sword, all I could ask for was to kill it well and quickly so it would suffer as little as possible.

This account reinforces the idea that bullfighting is not just a practice of interspecies violence but a space where gender and masculinity hierarchies are structured. The bullfighter gains patriarchal dividends not only by surviving and dominating the bull but also by being the one who decides which bull is “worthy” of living and which is not.

In this sense, bullfighting reaffirms not only masculinity as a spectacle—and, therefore, as belonging to the public sphere—but also a spectacularisation of anthropocentrism. Not every human being has access to this status, but only those who embody hegemonic masculinity: the cis-heterosexual man, disciplined in dominance and violence.

3.3. Slaughterhouses: occupation and sexual division of labour

The analytical exercise in this section includes two typologies around the construction of the masculinity of slaughterhouse workers. Within the comparative exercise, we identify two types of habitus that summarise how the masculine identifications of animal killers are configured: on the one hand, the type of masculinity that is constructed from occupation and experience of class and, on the other, the masculinity that is formed through the sexual division of labour. Then, we present explanations that support the findings.

3.3.1. Slaughterhouse workers: the occupation and the experience of class

The narratives of the slaughterers interviewed give an account of how masculinity is shaped, particularly masculinity in relation to the trade. This shaping is structural and demonstrates how the class experience (Scott, 2008; Thompson, 1989) conditions the practice of work (as animal slaughterers) and, at the same time, how insertion into the labour market produces a masculinity that is constructed and moulded through an interspecies habitus, that is, through the structuring between the conditions of precariousness, access to work, the job itself, manliness (or becoming a man), and the relationship with non-human animals.

In the case of the slaughterers, their positions of origin account for at least two explanatory elements. On the one hand, the job of killing animals is a job that one takes from necessity. On the other, the profession is passed on from father to son, thus supporting the reproduction of

class and gender inequalities. These enclassing qualities, as well as others described later, give us elements to understand the experiences of these men as a type of subaltern masculinity (Connell, 2003).

An example of the first point, “killing out of necessity”, is this excerpt from the interview with V. G., a 66-year-old slaughterer who is also the father of H. G., another of our interviewees. V.G. points out:

I was with my poor mother from childhood (...) My mother worked as a domestic and I used to go to help her. Small as I was, I already worked at anything to earn us breakfast or lunch. I went to the house of a woman who became very important in my life, who is like my second mother, I was there until I was 18 (...). I left there because I was stubborn, I fell in love, and they didn't like the relationship. I went out to the street, with the person I got together with. She took me because she did have money, and everything screwed up. The week after we got together, I didn't have a job. So, I went to ask for a job where they do building work, and they gave me a job. I worked there for just two days, because on the second day a great friend who worked in the slaughterhouse saw me, he found me digging in the ground and said, What are you doing there? I replied that I was working. And he suggested I work at the slaughterhouse. This was in 1980. At that time, I didn't have any money at all, so he took out 100 sucres that they were going to pay me that week, and told me to buy boots and a knife, we'll be waiting for you at four in the morning on Wednesday, because on Tuesday I worked. I didn't go back to work, and I arrived at the slaughterhouse at four in the morning. There my friend was waiting for me, and he told me, “Come and learn”.

The narrative of this butcher shows his state of poverty and his fortuitous encounter, learning to work in the slaughterhouse out of necessity through a support network with a friend. Throughout the interview, as well as in the excerpt above, V. G. tells of the vicissitudes of a man marked by class and gender inequalities. These vicissitudes must be understood as mechanisms through which structural violence, which is both material and symbolic, operates. Following Bourdieu (2010), we can see in V. G.'s biography the somatisation of the social relations of domination around the construction of his sex-gender identity, his class position and his work.

This somatisation of the social relations of domination, found in all the slaughterers interviewed, operates, among other possible observations, through bodies. Here it is useful to return to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to analyse how the bodily hexis or bodily habitus operates to legitimise relations of domination in three interconnected ways. The first is in the production of subaltern masculinities (Connell, 2003). Slaughterers, unlike cockfighters, and particularly unlike bull-

fighters, are formed through social spaces and enclassing practices, constituted by precariousness and the reproduction of inequalities. The second way articulates the process of identification of (subaltern) masculinities in relation to the practice of the trade. Learning to kill and cut up animals has levels of specialisation, of uses of the body, use of tools, spatial distribution, and bodily risk that require bodily capital (Wacquant, 2006). This bodily capital perfects the skill and, in addition, is inherited by their children. Finally, the third way produces an interspecies habitus. As Bourdieu points out, male domination “is not reduced to a strictly performative operation (...). It is completed and realised in a profound and lasting transformation of bodies, that is, in and through a work of practical construction that imposes a differentiated definition of the legitimate uses of the body” (Bourdieu, 2010b: 37). However, our empirical material showed us that this process of practical construction constantly emulates a struggle between the bodies of men in relation to the bodies of the animals, and vice versa.

At the start of the job, the testimonies place the animals’ tears as a hint of interaction and connection, as V. G. says: “These animals, before reaching where they die, enter crying, with tears.” H. G. comments similarly: “The cows also shed tears at the beginning, and so do you too at the beginning, because it gave you a guilty conscience, you could say, having killed an animal.”

Later on, having learnt and got used to killing, the interspecies habitus legitimises cruelty, naturalising the job, but, above all, naturalising man’s violence towards animals. In this sense, it is worth emphasising that “bodies are *substantively* at stake in social practices” (Connell, 2003: 91, italics added).

To recapitulate, the analytical relationship between class, work and interspecies relations provides elements to explain how the biographies and practices of slaughterers condition the construction of subaltern masculinities, both in themselves and in relation to that of cockfighters and bullfighters.

3.3.2. *Sexual division of work*

Gender relations in the lives of slaughterers, for this case understanding gender relations as the interactions between men and women, are present throughout the testimonies, in all activities. From everyday life exemplified in love matches and breakups to the participation of women in slaughter, the biographies show us very dynamic and active interactions.

On the one hand, we could even observe the fracture of a type of *subaltern masculinity* that appears fragile in emotional relationships in the face of the characteristics of *hegemonic masculinity* (Raewyn W. Con-

nell, 2003), virility and manhood. This fracture can be identified, in explanatory terms, through the testimony of V. G.:

I have cried a lot, sir, a lot, a lot. I came to discover that my first wife, the one in Spain, betrayed me, they told me that she was betraying me. While I was working, she was going out with the child's father, who she had told me had died, which was a lie. But well, I didn't believe it until I saw it myself. I rented a car to go and see if it was true, and it was true. We reached an agreement to separate, and she left with all the things, and I stayed in the empty room, alone like a little dog.

In this extract, a particularity of his subaltern masculinity is his experience of heartbreak, in addition to his exercise of a trade learned and carried out under precarious conditions. This slaughterer openly tells everything that he has cried over upon learning of the deception of his "first wife." He also comments on the lies, the unmasking, the separation agreement, and equates his abandonment to the loneliness of "a little dog." These are brief images from an extensive narrative that his interview provides about how the separation led to him being left caring for a child (a child who was not his, but which he raised as his own), without a home and without a job. This trigger led him "out of necessity" to take the job as a slaughterer, the conditions of which, as we have seen previously, can be classified as part of subaltern masculinities.

Also, in the job of killing animals for commercialisation, there is a clear sexual division of labour, since women also participate in the work. These are the testimonies of M. N. and H. G.:

That is, washing the viscera. The women work in another section (different from that of the men). The viscera go on a slide and go somewhere else, and from there the women take the viscera, pick up the intestines, the belly, the white viscera, divide them and put them on one side. Lastly, they wash them, and they are ready for sale. (the parenthesis is ours).

In the Sangolquí slaughterhouse, it's the same, in the same way. They are predominantly men for the duties of slaughter. Due to the very fact that the animals are heavy, it is hard work to lift an animal. Or try lifting a hide. We are talking about some 100 pounds of hide. So, it is not the same weight for a woman in a daily job. On the other hand, the question of washing giblets or what is involved in classifying the giblets, it's the same there as in the slaughterhouse here, in the Sangolquí slaughterhouse, in the Saquisilí slaughterhouse, women predominate. It is like this, it is as I say, I know various slaughterhouses, I could say, in which the majority of workers are just men, in what is the animal carving line.

These narratives show that slaughter is an activity mainly for men. Women, on the other hand, are responsible for selecting, washing and classifying the viscera (giblets). This sexual division of labour occurs, specifically, because women do not have enough strength to carry, lift and carve animals. Therefore, as H. G. points out, most of the workers in the slaughterhouses are men, although V. G., the most experienced slaughterer, said in the interview that “women know perfectly well how to slaughter”. This statement leaves open the need to continue studying gender constructions, particularly women’s identities, in jobs that have been predominantly male. Could women carry the 100 pounds that a beef hide weighs? Could women lift an animal? Is it the case, as V. G. states, that women know how to slaughter perfectly well? In this sense, it is important to point out that the sexual division of labour has contributed to classifying work and production in gendered terms, on the one hand, and, on the other, has contributed to reproducing imaginaries and representations around the jobs that must be performed by men and women.

In summary, to explain how gender relations are constructed we must understand that, for this case study, genderisation is dynamic, but at the same time oblique and with gradients. However, what predominates is the sexual division of labour as a class-gender structure.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This article has examined, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the psychosocial and ideological conditioning in the construction of masculine social identities around animal exploitation practices. Studying these practices and analysing the human-animal relationships that unfold in bullfights, cockfights, and slaughterhouses helps us to understand how masculinity is shaped in relation to animalities—in this case, of domesticated and exploited animals.

The analysis focused on three specific spaces—slaughterhouses, bullrings, and cockfighting venues—each structured by particular logics and relational dispositions between humans and animals. These spaces serve as arenas for the expression and reinforcement of masculinities, shaped by the cultural and symbolic meanings attributed to animals and to their suffering or subjugation. Each context presents specific configurations of masculinity, mediated by speciesist violence and deeply embedded in class, gender, and national ideologies. Through a comparative lens, the interspecies modalities—submission and habituation in slaughterhouses, confrontation and domination in bullfighting, and proxy competition in cockfighting—alongside patterns of animal socialisation, resistance,

and symbolic roles, reveal how masculine identities are constructed in relation to animals. These practices operate within distinct legal frameworks and social perceptions, from the low-prestige, yet legal, violence of slaughterhouses to the culturally charged but legally restricted practices of bullfighting and cockfighting, each reinforcing different forms of virility, power, and emotional regulation (as seen in Table 2).

Table 2. Masculinities and interspecies habitus

Dimension	Slaughterhouse	Bullfighting	Cockfighting
Modality of interspecies relation	Submission and habituation	Confrontation and domination	Alliance, projection, and proxy competition
Animal socialisation	For docility and routine compliance	For aggression and symbolic resistance	For combativeness and emotional bonding
Forms of animal resistance	Passive-Active (e.g., fleeing, freezing)	Active (e.g., charging, confronting)	Offensive (e.g., reciprocal aggression between animals)
Symbolic-anthropological role	Economic necessity; routinised violence	Sacrificial spectacle; national and gender identity	Homosocial prestige; projection of virility and competitiveness
Masculine configuration	Enduring masculinity defined by toughness and emotional suppression	Spectacularised masculinity emphasising control over life, death and wildness	Competitive masculinity focussed on homosocial bonding, virility and aggression
Legal status (Ecuador)	Legal	Legally restricted	Legally restricted Relatively illegal
Social perception	Low prestige; socially stigmatised; associated with “dirty work”	Traditionally prestigious in very few provinces of the country, now increasingly contested due to social and legal struggles	Repressed but culturally significant in some communities; subject to legal prohibition and public controversy

In the case of cockfights, the construction of masculinity revolves around homosocial bonding, prestige, and competitiveness. Here, the animal becomes an extension of the male self, instrumentalised in a performance of virility, where the gamecock’s success in the fight translates into personal honour. The inter-male dynamics are characterised by both complicity and rivalry, reinforcing a model of masculinity predicated on dominance, aggression, and symbolic identification with the animal proxy. These findings contribute to the literature on “blood sports” (Kalof, 2014; Kalof & Fitzgerald, 2003), particularly extending the analysis to contexts other than hunting (Kalof et al., 2004), where the gendered dynamics of animal killing have been previously explored.

In bullfighting, despite the presence of female bullfighters (Pink, 2003), the space is culturally and symbolically coded as masculine. It operates through a deeply dichotomised framework—reason/emotion, civilisation/barbarism—where the control over death and nature serves to legitimise a spectacularised form of virility. The bull, as an emblem of wildness, becomes the medium through which the *torero* enacts mastery, rationality, and bravery. The act of killing, or publicly sparing, the bull is a ritualised display of power over life and death, echoing long-standing associations between masculinity and the control of nature (Bordonaro, 2012; Bourdieu, 2000).

In the case of slaughterhouse workers, masculinity is constructed through a more quotidian and economically conditioned relationship with animals. The work is framed by necessity, family inheritance, and the demands of industrial production. In this context, masculinity is often defined by the suppression of compassion and the embodiment of endurance and toughness. Nevertheless, emotional ambivalence is central: fear, sadness, and empathy surface as part of the workers' experience, revealing internal conflicts and the human cost of routinised violence (Ponce León & Ávila Gaitán, 2024). These findings intersect with the literature on working-class masculinities (Connell, 2003), while also contributing to recent debates on *hybrid masculinities* (Greenebaum & Dexter, 2018) and male emotional compensation mechanisms (Young, 2017), particularly in relation to the emotional labour demanded by gendered and speciesist labour systems.

A significant point concerning these forms of animal killing is their *legal* status in Ecuador. While both bullfighting and cockfighting are legally restricted and subject to increasing public contestation, they continue despite the historical struggle of social movements advocating for animal rights (Ponce León, 2020a). These movements have sought to prohibit such practices; however, bullfighting and cockfighting continue to occupy a significant place in the certain cultural traditions and colonial legacies (Ponce León, 2024b), reflecting how historical structures of domination over both animals and marginalised human communities remain embedded in contemporary cultural identities.

On the other hand, slaughterhouse killings are legal but often associated with *dirty work* (Baran et al., 2016), carrying a stigma of low prestige and social marginalisation. This creates a fascinating juxtaposition where, while the slaughter of animals is legally sanctioned, the work is devalued socially, in contrast to the more celebrated but legally restricted practices of bullfighting and cockfighting.

Significantly, despite the divergent expressions of masculinity in each case, a common denominator across these settings is the presence of direct physical violence toward animals, albeit manifested different-

ly. Bullfighters confront animals publicly and heroically; cockfighters direct violence through a proxy animal; and slaughterhouse workers enact violence in private, repetitive (Baran et al., 2016), and structural ways (Oliveira, 2021). In bullfighting and cockfighting, violence is stylised and publicly celebrated as a sign of virility; in slaughterhouses, violence is instrumental, normalised, and emotionally managed through the suppression of perceived feminine traits such as compassion.

A central analytical contribution of the findings of this study is the introduction of the concept of *interspecies habitus* to interpret the embodied and emotional dispositions that structure the interactions between men and animals across these settings. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Bourdieu, 2008 [1977]), we propose *interspecies habitus* as a field-specific, socially acquired system of dispositions that organise the practices and perceptions of masculinity in relation to animal life. This habitus is shaped not only by the gender order but also by speciesist hierarchies, economic structures, and cultural norms, and is continuously reinforced through embodied practices and institutional arrangements.

In slaughterhouses, for example, *interspecies habitus* manifests itself through the normalisation of cruelty and the development of emotional endurance. The workers learn to relate to animals through a regime of affective disassociation, which is not the result of insensitivity, but of a socially enforced adaptation to the violence of the work environment. Here, the habitus integrates a contradiction: acknowledging animal suffering while simultaneously suppressing emotional responses to it, aligning with masculine ideals of stoicism and strength.

In cockfighting contexts, the *interspecies habitus* is built around competition and symbolic substitution. The gamecock becomes a phallic and martial extension of the self, and victory in the fight reinforces masculine status. This fosters a culture where men derive identity from their animal proxies, with the gamecock's death functioning both as sacrifice and triumph.

Bullfighters, meanwhile, embody a habitus of dominance and performative control, shaped by ritualistic and aesthetic values. Their relationship with the bull involves a choreographed confrontation with death, where bravery, elegance, and rationality are celebrated as masculine virtues. The bull becomes both adversary and mirror—a wild force to be subdued and thereby used to reflect the superiority of human, and specifically male, civilisation.

The concept of *interspecies habitus* also provides a useful framework for understanding the intersections between masculinity, crime, and power. Following Messerschmidt's reformulation of *hegemonic masculinity* (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2018, 2020), criminal or semi-criminalised

practices—such as cockfighting and bullfighting—can be read as gendered strategies of action, through which some men perform masculinity in contexts of structural subordination or limited access to dominant forms of male power. In these cases, engaging in violent practices against animals—despite or even because of their illegality—functions as a means of attaining respect, visibility, and masculine status within specific peer cultures. The *interspecies habitus* helps us to conceptualise how these gendered practices become embodied, legitimated, and naturalised in relation to animals, while simultaneously reproducing social hierarchies and exclusions.

In this sense, the notion of *interspecies habitus* contributes to the understanding of how masculinity is co-produced through the domination not only of other humans, but also of non-human animals, and how violence against animals may become central to the performance of masculinities, particularly in marginalised or subordinated contexts. Thus, the analysis of animal-related crime opens a window into the structural inequalities and symbolic economies of masculinity, showing how criminalisation, class, and species intersect in the constitution of masculine power.

At the same time, this analytical focus does not imply a denial of animal sentience, agency, or resistance. On the contrary, the empirical material repeatedly points to moments of animal resistance, refusal, and disruption—whether through flight, confrontation, vocalisation, or bodily struggle—which actively shape the practices and affects of the men involved. However, in this article, these forms of resistance are approached relationally, as elements that intervene in the construction of masculinities, rather than as a primary object of analysis in their own right. In fact, future research could build on the present findings to centre more explicitly the experiential, affective, and political dimensions of animal resistance, exploring how the *interspecies habitus* described here is lived, contested, or reconfigured from the perspective of animals themselves, as well as how such dynamics are addressed within animal law and welfare frameworks.

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