This paper examines rhotacization in rural Brazilian Portuguese, in complex onset (*pranta ~ planta* ‘plant’). In Brazil, pronouncing [r] instead of [l] in such contexts is rather stigmatized - it tends to be associated with working-class speakers with lower levels of education (Castro, 2006; Costa, 2006). In Taboco, a rural town in central Brazil, we find that the nonstandard form is favored by women. Considering previous works on the role of women in processes of variation and change (Labov, 1972, Chambers, 1995, Romaine, 2006), we raise the question about whether Taboco’s women play a different role, in comparison to those in other communities, like Rio de Janeiro (Tem Tem, 2006).

Taboco is centrally located in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, about 140 km from the state capital Campo Grande and about 1,000 km from the city of São Paulo (the country’s economic center). Its estimated population is 650 inhabitants. We analysed 10 hours of conversation with 16 speakers, stratified by sex/gender and two age groups (15-35 or older), all of whom have only studied up to elementary school.

In a multivariate analysis with Goldvarb, the effect of two structural variables on the rhotacization was tested in 1,034 tokens: presence of another liquid segment in the word and the voiceness of the previous segment. Results show that rhotacization tends to occur when there is another liquid segment in the word (.61) as in claro ~ craro ‘clear’ and when preceded by voiceless consonants (as in biciCLEta ~ biciCREta ‘bicycle’).

Rhotacization is also favored by older informants (.66). However, it is favored by women (.52) rather than men (.47). Furthermore, crossing gender and age reveals that rhotacization is more common among older women (.58) than older men (.44), but the trend is reversed among younger speakers: rhotacization tends to occur more in younger men’s speech (.54) than in women’s (.46).

Based on these results, this paper discusses the differentiation among women in a small town. Most of Taboco’s younger women are engaged only in domestic activities. They have less contact with men in the community and are not exposed to social pressures of linguistic groups outside the familiar group. In contrast, most older women work outside the house (as public servers, seamstresses, cooks etc) and are key to their household income – so they seem to take on an identity more similar to men’s. This paper discusses the unexpected use of the stigmatized form as a possible correlate of the social reality in Taboco.