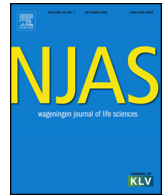




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# Exploring the roles of women in the development of multifunctional entrepreneurship on family farms: an entrepreneurial learning approach

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses women's roles in the learning process that accompanies the switch towards multifunctionality and multifunctional entrepreneurship: the process by which farmers gain the necessary knowledge and skills 'to do multifunctionality', develop and adapt their identity as 'multifunctional entrepreneurs', and re-establish the identity of the farm as a multifunctional one. Detailed inspection of men's and women's positions and functions in the learning process reveals women's leading roles in: 1) introducing new identities and practices onto the farm, 2) providing access to new networks and learning environments, and 3) initiating negotiation within the farming family regarding the farm's (future) orientation towards primary production or multifunctionality. All three aspects of learning are essential building blocks for the development of multifunctional entrepreneurship on family farms. The paper is based on a study of 120 Dutch multifunctional farms, with a detailed analysis of the genderedness of the entrepreneurial learning process in three specific farm cases.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decades, many European farmers have started new activities on their farm. In so doing, they have not only generated new sources of income, but have also established agriculture as an activity that offers multiple services to society which go beyond mass food production [1,2]. The development of new business activities by these farmers can be seen as underlying evidence of a shift from the conventional production-oriented model of agriculture towards a new paradigm of multifunctionality [3,4].

It has widely been agreed upon that such a switch towards multifunctionality requires the development of entrepreneurial skills among farmers [5–12] as well as a re-orientation of their farm identity towards an entrepreneurial identity [13,14]. So far, this learning process has been studied as an individual path and although there is considerable knowledge of which skills are required, we have little insight into how learning proceeds at the level of the farm and within the farming family. This is important as in Europe, farming

is generally a family activity; generally, multifunctional agriculture engages not only 'the farmer' but the whole farming family and often paid labour forces too [15,16].

In addition to the importance of taking account of the fact that most farms in Europe are owned and managed by families [16,17], it is equally important to keep the specific dynamic of gender relations on family farms in mind. Numerous studies have pointed out the inequality between men and women in agriculture in terms of ownership of capital, labour division and decision making power [18–22]. Even today, most European farms are formally held by men and the management of production is also generally seen as a male domain [23]. This seems to be changing, however, as it is generally women who take the lead in the process of switching towards multifunctionality [15]. This is particularly the case with the *non-farming* business activities that are most prominent on multifunctional farms, such as agro-tourism, processing and direct sale and (in the Netherlands) integrated (child)care [24–26].

In the 1990s, many studies looked into the specific role of women in the development of multifunctionality, aiming to understand if and how it changed women's position and contributed to their empowerment. They argued that while modernisation pushed farm women into a peripheral position in farm management, women succeeded in regaining a central position by integrating

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new business activities and rebuilding their own labour domain [21]. These studies shed light on the important roles of women in the initiation and further development of new on-farm businesses as well as their crucial economic contribution to the survival of family farms [22].

In short, although several studies have described how multifunctionality starts through the addition of new activities which are eventually expanded and interwoven with other farm activities [3], we still know surprisingly little about the learning process that supports this change, and might be considered as the actual motor of change 'behind the scenes' [27]. This study aims to contribute to filling this gap in the literature. As it is generally women who take the lead in the process of switching towards multifunctionality [15], we focus particularly on their specific roles in the collective learning process supporting the development of multifunctional entrepreneurship in family farms. The following research question is guiding this study:

*What specific roles do women play in the learning process underlying the development of multifunctional entrepreneurship in family farms?*

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. We will first elaborate on the theoretical basis of this study by discussing the literature on the genderedness of family farms and the theory of entrepreneurial learning which functions as the main framework. The following section elaborates on the research design of the study. This section is important as it explains how we departed from a research project with a rather general focus examining 120 farms, but ended up with a focus on gender and three detailed case studies. The paper continues with the presentation of the main findings and closes by drawing and discussing the main conclusions.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Gendered role divisions in family farming

As farms are usually passed through the generations from father to son and therefore owned and managed by men, farming is broadly identified as a male business [21,28,29]. Women, in contrast, generally enter the farming business through marriage [19,30]. The division of roles is often gender-specific: most farm work is done by men, whereas women do most of the work inside the house, besides domestic work and childcare, often including farm administration and some manual farm labour [23,31]. Due to their family backgrounds and prominent roles in farm management, men generally derive their identities from farming [28,32]. In contrast, women's identities have been found to be more connected to their role as farmers' wives [21,29] or as daughters-in-law [19]. More specifically, Whatmore [29] argued that women's roles and identities are rooted in an agricultural gender ideology which prescribes their role and identity as 'wives' and 'mothers' instead of 'farmers'. This traditional gendered role division is strong, as it was found to have been widely reproduced until recently [31,33].

The modernisation of agriculture which took place during the last century has supported the masculinisation of agriculture. The post-WWII modernisation process is particularly regarded as having pushed women out of farming. Whilst farm women were involved in a large share of farming (e.g. in milking), the redistribution of farm work due to new agricultural technologies meant that farm women became more 'housewives' than 'farmers' [21]. In some countries, farm women started working off-farm and found paid employment, for instance in nursing, teaching and administration [34]. This, however, was rarely the case in the Netherlands until quite recently [15]. Coming from a feminist approach, many researchers point at modernisation as the cause

of the gradual subordination of farm women through the closure of female labour domains, resulting in the de-skilling of female farm labour [18,20,21,35].

The rise of agricultural multifunctionality in the 1990s has changed this situation by providing farm women with the opportunity to integrate new economic activities into the family farm [36–38] and develop a new professional identity as 'new rural entrepreneurs' [15,24]. In other words, whereas agricultural modernisations pushed women out, the development of multifunctionality has started to bring them back onto the family farm. Currently, it is widely acknowledged that with their new activities, farm women are central to the development of multifunctional entrepreneurship in agriculture and make a great contribution to the survival of family farms [15,26,31]. There are also some indications that this development affects men, who sometimes watch the increasing multifunctionality of their farm with concern, worrying about the loss of its agricultural identity [32,39,40]. Most of the studies, however, inquire into how multifunctionality affects the position of women. Whilst many of them point out that multifunctionality fosters more equal gender relations in agriculture, there is work which underlines the obstinacy and continuity of gender inequality [21]. We do not yet know how to explain these different and seemingly contradictory findings. Possibly, the effect of multifunctionality differs across time and place; the type of multifunctional orientation and level of integration into the farm is also likely to make a difference [3,41]. This paper, however, is not primarily concerned with the changing position of women; it is mainly interested in which roles they play in the learning process that accompanies the shift towards multifunctionality.

### 2.2. Entrepreneurial learning

The shift towards multifunctionality substantially changes farmers' role in agriculture and requires them to develop new identities, knowledge, skills and networks [13,42,43]. Key, in this transition, is the development of 'multifunctional entrepreneurship' or the propensity, knowledge and skills to 'do multifunctionality' [9,10,14,44]. In the present study, the development of multifunctional entrepreneurship is approached through the lens of *entrepreneurial learning* [45–49]. We use the concept to unveil the specific roles that farm women play in the daily, work-related and joint learning process through which farmers acquire the propensity, knowledge and skills required to start, develop and integrate new multifunctional business activities into their farms. In other words, it is the learning process which takes place during daily entrepreneurial performance and through which farmers and their families develop their multifunctional entrepreneurship.

In studies on entrepreneurial learning, two main approaches can be distinguished: an individual-cognitive and a socially-situated one [50,51]. Whereas the first approach derives its theoretical foundations from Kolb's [52] work on 'experiential learning', the latter is rooted in Lave and Wenger's [53] notion of 'situated learning'. In contrast to Kolb, the anthropologists Lave and Wenger see learning as a social phenomenon rather than as a purely cognitive process. It is this socially situated perspective of entrepreneurial learning upon which this study draws.

Central in the present study is the framework of entrepreneurial learning developed by Rae [47]<sup>1</sup>. Apart from encompassing the individual-cognitive and the socially-situated perspective on learning described above, Rae's framework suits our study as it also

<sup>1</sup> Rae's [47] framework was used earlier by the first author of this paper in a study exploring the entrepreneurial learning process in multifunctional agriculture from a more general point of view [27].

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