



Joint Farming Ventures in Ireland: Gender identities of the self and the social



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ABSTRACT

Decades of research have shown farm women to occupy a subjugated position in family farming, without recourse for meaningful input to decision-making on the farm. Despite the structurally deterministic leanings of the literature, studies have also highlighted the capacity of farm women to exercise agency and manoeuvre around patriarchal norms in agriculture. Women's off-farm work in particular is frequently cited as a source of empowerment for farm women. However, little attention is paid to the joint strategies of how both men and women together challenge the dominant narrative of gender on the family farm. Drawing from qualitative research with Irish farmers involved in Joint Farming Ventures (JFVs), which are formal arrangements for the co-management of farms, our analysis coheres around the three concepts of gender, identity and agency. We explore the significance of JFVs in exploring questions of self and social identity. We examine to what extent JFVs represent changing self-identities and a sense of agency for women on farms, and whether they imbue altering social identities for women on Irish farms. More generally, we consider the extent to which JFVs, involving women as co-owners of farms, evidence a departure from patriarchal agriculture and patrilineal ownership. While attentive to patriarchy, the narratives of women and men illustrate an alternative discourse of farming, constituted of increasingly equitable relationships; women occupying the position of 'farmer', and the confirmation and a reinforcing of their position by men. Aspects of identity are explored through the roles men and women now occupy, the family and farming groups to which they belong and how these are freighted by the category of gender. Moreover, we critically assess the extent to which JFVs enhance agency and make these type of identities possible.

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1. Introduction

The literature on gender and family farming has leaned towards structural determinism, focusing on patriarchy and the subjugation of women (Shortall, 2006 citing Hoggart, 2004). Feminist scholars have drawn attention to the domestic political ideology of the family farm with gender politics constructing agriculture as an exclusively masculine space, excluding women from agricultural production, reinforcing the hegemonic position of men (Barlett and Conger, 2004; Brandth, 1995; Saugeres, 2002a). Women are typically portrayed as 'caring' with little capacity to challenge patriarchal control or to define themselves through agricultural production. Confined to a subordinate role within farm households,

women performed gruelling domestic chores which were private, invisible, and supplied little in terms of status or prestige (Gasson, 1980; Gasson and Errington, 1993; Shortall, 1992; Whatmore, 1991). While sites of contestation emerge, the literature has stressed that the family farm remains patriarchal, with unequal gender relations unacknowledged and unquestioned (Campbell and Bell, 2000; Saugeres, 2002a,b; Shortall, 1992).

While such explanations have illuminated the gendered structure of the family farm and the subordinate identity of farm women, there is less literature on farm women's potential for strong agency, their capacity to contest and resist patriarchal norms and the manner in which they gain recognition as farmers (Brandth, 2002; Riley, 2009). Importantly, where farm women's agency has been discussed, it centres on the economic and emotional impact of off-farm work (O'Hara, 1998; Shortall, 2014). Interested in the slow emergence of alternative gender identities for farm women, Shortall (2014) investigates the meaning of

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women's off-farm work for on-farm gender and work identities. Her research demonstrates that change has occurred but that women protect male farmer identity allowing 'the family farm discourse to persist', raising the question of the cost arising for farm women's identities (p. 79). More attention to the agency of women inside the farm gate is merited to understand the change that is occurring to gender and work identities in agriculture.

One model identified as disruptive to patriarchal ownership and control are formal, legal arrangements known as Joint Farming Ventures (JFVs), where two or more farmers operate a farm business jointly without necessarily co-owning the land on which the business is operated (Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012). JFVs enable an equal decision making function between the parties involved. JFVs are formal, legal arrangements established by spouses; parents and offspring; or neighbouring farmers related and un-related by kin. They are identified by various authors as having the potential to address a range of challenges experienced by farmers, such as inadequate scale and resources in the context of commodity production (Almås, 2010; Ingram and Kirwan, 2011; Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012); social isolation (Almås, 2010; Egil-Flø, 2006; Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012); modernising gender roles within family farms (Byrne et al., 2014) and improved careers in agriculture for youth (Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012). In Ireland, the formation of Joint Farming Ventures (JFVs) as a business model for the family farm has been shown to improve the economic resilience of the farm household (Macken-Walsh and Roche, 2012); reduce social isolation in rural areas (Cush and Macken-Walsh, 2016); facilitate succession by providing more equitable social relationships on the farm between farm youth and the landholder (Cush and Macken-Walsh, 2016); and provide increasing opportunities for farm women to gain decision making functions on the farm (Byrne et al., 2014).

In Ireland, the formation of JFVs is incentivised by policy instruments and there are currently at least 411 formally registered JFVs in Ireland involving women. Drawing from qualitative research with Irish farmers involved in JFVs, which are formal arrangements for the co-management of farms, our analysis coheres around the three concepts of gender, identity and agency. We explore the significance of JFVs in the interplay between self and social identity. We examine to what extent JFVs represent changing self-identities and a sense of agency for women on farms, and whether they imbue alternative social identities for women on Irish farms? More specifically, to what extent do JFVs, involving women as co-owners of farms, evidence a departure from patriarchal agriculture and patrilineal ownership? We begin this paper by reviewing the literature on gender and agriculture, highlighting the subordinated position of women and the ways in which they have been documented in challenging patriarchal norms. We couch our analysis in the three overlapping concepts of gender, identity and agency to illuminate how farm partnerships can provide more equitable relationships on the farm. We outline the methodology used in the study and the ways in which JFVs are expressive of visible, occupational self-identities for farm women. We present evidence of the empowered roles farm women occupy in these legal arrangements and examine the role of their male partners. The implications of the findings for the literature on women in family farming are discussed.

1.1. Women and the farm

Gender is one of the primary means through which people anchor and develop a stable sense of self and social identity. Byrne (2003, 4) discusses gender through a lens of self and social identity:

"gender is regarded as involved in the primary ordering of social identities: it is a collective categorisation, marking boundaries of difference between female and male, stressing similarity within these social categories, but also emphasising difference within hierarchies of males and females...while self-identity is composed in complex interaction with others and closely joined with social identity, it is a reference to the self, that sense of ourselves as unique and individual persons' (Byrne, 2003, p.6).

Gender as a category is associated with male privilege, power and hierarchy (Connell, 1995). According to Ridgeway (2009) gender operates as a primary cultural frame, which structures social relations, privileging men over women, reinforced through social interaction in domains such as work and family. Women are structurally positioned as less proactive with limited capacity to exert power and influence in contrast to the capacity of tough, strong and tenacious men (Saugeres, 2002a,b). Female social identity is partially constructed within the power dynamics of hierarchical gender politics, which can have a constricting effect on self-identity (Byrne, 2003; Connell, 1987). Byrne (2003, p.6) observes that "gender, like identity, is simultaneously internal and external to the person. It is deeply implicated in the composition of self-identity, affecting personal conceptions of social identities of womanhood or manhood".

The gender and power structures of family farming operate to the extent as Shortall (2014) observes that they are no longer visible to those involved. In western countries and in much of the world, women don't own farmland. Byrne et al. (2014) report that in Europe, one in four agricultural holders is a woman, rising to one in three in Baltic countries (Eurostat, 2009) and women's share of farmland overall is smaller because they typically own smaller holdings (European Commission, 2012). Outside the EU, examples are Vietnam where 8% of land is held by women with 5% held jointly and in Peru, 13% of landowners are women with another 13% in joint ownership (Deere and Leon, 2003). In Africa, customary laws provide women with access to land but no ownership rights (Tripp, 2004). Apart from contexts such as West Bengal, Kerala and Sri Lanka, where there are customs of matrilineal or equal inheritance and women own 30–35% of farmland, women are far less likely to own farm property than men (Bhatla et al., 2010). Data on farmland transactions in Ireland demonstrate that two-thirds of farms remain in family ownership for a century or more (NDP GEU, 2004) with 12% of farms owned by women (CSO, 2012).

Scholars note a dichotomy of identities and roles in the farm household and argue that a gendered distinction between the productive (male) and reproductive (female) work roles on the farm persist. Reproductive tasks are coded female, productive tasks as male (Brandth, 2002; Whatmore, 1991). This is partly a consequence of patrilineal succession norms, where the farm is passed from father to son, with women mainly entering farming through marriage rather than occupational choice (Kennedy, 1991; O'Hara, 1998; Shortall, 1999; Shortall and Byrne, 2009). Farmer identity is aligned with male identity, control of farm capital and position as a head of household. Saugeres (2002a) argues that men's control of the tractor serves a symbolic function to emphasise the man's 'natural' capacity for farming, reinforcing the boundary between men and women's roles on the farm. Male farmers' identity, which hinges upon their 'innate' understanding of the land stands in contrast to women's perceived absence of knowledge of the local landscape and her apparent lack of physical strength. Farming knowledge is incorporated into the construction of male farmers' identity. The man possess these critical traits, 'strengths' that are uncritically assumed as essential for the survival of the family farm (Saugeres, 2002b).

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