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## 'Creating a room of one's own': French farm women, agritourism and the pursuit of empowerment

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### SYNOPSIS

This paper explores how women use farm tourism as a vehicle for empowerment within the context of family farm agriculture. Drawing upon qualitative data of a farm women's agritourism network in southern France, we show that farm tourism enables women to cultivate personal empowerment strategies. Farm tourism allows women the opportunity to create a physical space for autonomy and individual creativity where they can pursue personal goals and overcome social isolation; in this way, it advances the process of empowerment. However, the process of empowerment is not without challenge. We demonstrate how the persistence of a patriarchal culture informed by an agrarian ideology can complicate this process. This study suggests that farm tourism permits women the possibility for constructing autonomous objectives which can lead to empowerment to the extent that they are acceptable to males and refrain from impeding male-led farming activity.

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### Introduction

Invisibility has characterized the experience of women in agriculture (Barthez, 2005; Delphy, 1983; Nicourt, 2014; Rieu & Dahache, 2007). Despite the fact that women have always been integral to food and fiber production, their participation in farming, especially because it took place within the context of the family, remained largely unnoticed (Delphy, 1983). French farm women's invisibility has historically been accomplished by both legal and socio-cultural means and can be traced to the contours of peasant society characterized by patriarchy and agrarian ideology (Mendras, 1995; Segalen, M., 1983).

Results of the 2010 French agricultural census appear to challenge this conceptualization by shedding light on a demographic shift: more than one-fourth of all farm operators and/or co-operators are women, up from only 8% in 1970. Likewise, one-fourth of beginning farmers are women (Wepierre, Lerbourg, & Courleux, 2012). Since the 1970s, women have altered their agricultural status through inclusion in legal frameworks meant to recognize and protect their interests which has allowed them to gain visibility and voice (Barthez, 2005; Rieu & Dahache, 2008). French law today allows women to be recognized as full farm partners.

Studies suggest that women tend to farm differently than most male operators (Rieu & Dahache, 2008). Today's farm woman may operate her own farm independently or may be a co-operating partner with another individual (typically husband). She is more often older than the average farmer—respectively 54 and 51 years old (Wepierre et al., 2012), more educated, and she tends to operate smaller and

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more diversified farming systems. Female operators are more often engaged in sheep and/or goat milk production, fruit and vegetable farming, or viticulture production (Wepierre et al., 2012). Women are also more likely to open their farm up to the public in the form of farm tourism (Brandth & Haugen, 2011; Garcia-Ramon, Canoves, & Valdovinos, 1995; Giraud, 2011). In fact, women are popularly claimed to bring new insights and sensitivities to agriculture in general, owing to what are perceived to be their 'unique' skills, knowledge and subjectivity. Headlines routinely now explore the meaning of this feminization of agriculture: *Les femmes sont-elles l'avenir de l'agriculture* ("Are women the future of agriculture") (Groult, 2010, p. 1); *Les femmes en agriculture: Le statut des femmes évolue et l'agriculture y gagne* ("Women in agriculture: The status of women evolves and agriculture gains") (Le Sillon, 2013, p. 1); or, *Les agricultrices agissent pour l'avenir du monde rural* ("Farm women act in favor of the future of the rural world") (Ouest France, 2012, p.1).

Recently, we (Wright & Annes, 2014) explored how farm women involved in agritourism can build bridges and foster dialogue between farming and non-farming populations. Yet, in this paper, our intent is to move away from assessing what farm women bring to agriculture, but to interrogate the benefits women acquire for themselves. Using the case of a farm women's agritourism network in southern France, we explore the question of women's empowerment, asking whether participation in farm diversification through agritourism allows farm women to exercise their agency and challenge patriarchy and agrarian ideologies.

Farm tourism has gained recent attention,<sup>1</sup> but is not new to agriculture. Much of rural Europe has used rural tourism as an economic stream for decades (Oppermann, 1995; Sharpley & Vass, 2006). France introduced financial support systems to help redevelop old farm buildings into guest accommodations in 1954. However, it was only by the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, that it gained support from agricultural leaders. Currently, there is increased scrutiny of, and resistance to modern agriculture, creating space for new entrepreneurial climate (Muller, 2009; Muller, 1987). Agricultural leaders became wary that productionist agriculture could lead to undesirable consequences for national food production, ecological well-being, and cultural *patrimoine* (*heritage*), now stress a new production model based on the multiple benefits gained by agricultural diversity ("multifunctional agriculture"). Multifunctional agriculture valorizes production, but it also couples it with the production of other non-market related goods, such as health and nutrition, landscape, and cultural welfare. As a result, new farm activities—traditionally seen to be of little value<sup>2</sup>—are increasingly supported, such as on-farm processing, direct sales, and farm tourism.<sup>3</sup>

Multifunctional agriculture in general, and agritourism in particular, provided women new opportunities to invest in agriculture.<sup>4</sup> In fact, agritourism and gender often intersect. Several studies show that farm women are frequently pioneers in this economic development initiative (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Busby & Rendle, 2000; Garcia-Ramon et al., 1995; McGehee, Kim, & Jennings, 2007; Oppermann, 1995). Hosting visitors on the farm is suggested by the existing research to afford women the opportunity to move from a position of societal invisibility to assume roles that hold promise for personal empowerment (Cánoves, Villarino, Priestley, &

Blanco, 2004). Brandth and Haugen (2011, p. 425) argue that "engaging in farm tourism implies a change that not only demands new skills and competencies, but may also influence the conditions under which gender relationships, power, and identities are enacted." Others (Evans & Ilbery, 1996) have discovered that it offers no changes in women's position. Sharpley and Vass (2006) found that farm women operating tourism initiatives in north-eastern rural England to be highly motivated by job satisfaction and a sense of independence that farm tourism provides. They consider this an employment issue, however, we see this outcome as more of a socio-political issue. In the French context, it has been suggested that agritourism provides women with purpose, or a niche to fulfil on the farm (Giraud, 2004, 2007, 2011; Giraud & Rémy, 2013). Giraud (2011) argues that while tourism allowed French women to realize autonomy and to give value to their skills, this autonomy is not unfettered; it occurs within a context of dependence. Women are free to chart their own space for creativity and income generation, yet only to the extent it is agreeable with their husbands. This alerts us to the importance of the broader social structure, such as patriarchy or agrarian ideology, in which tourism is pursued. Patriarchy and agrarian ideologies are lingering expressions of rural France. For instance, Saugeres (2002a, 2002b, 2002c) indicates that, under an agrarian ideology, farm women are perceived as "incomplete farmers." She examined the representation of farm women in the French Aveyron region—the same region where we conducted this study—and found that women are perceived as lacking an innate knowledge of farming and an embodiment to the land (Saugeres, 2002a), as well as inadequate physical strength to be competent farmers (Saugeres, 2002c). Thus, the extent to which involvement in farm tourism modifies these cultural representations and therefore dismantles agrarian ideology remains unsettled.

In this article, we explore how women, 'create a room of their own' on the family farm, or how women use agritourism to pursue empowerment. In seeking to examine the empowering effects of agritourism, we have two objectives. Firstly, this work contributes to the conceptualization of empowerment—a concept which has mainly been used to understand the experiences of women in developing countries. This geographic lens allows us to add nuance to our understanding of this process. Secondly, we want to add to the literature on gender and farm tourism in general, and agritourism as a vehicle for women's empowerment, in particular. Most existing studies are based on field research in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries. Our research focuses on a French case allowing us to bring a Francophone perspective to the debate.

### Conceptualizing empowerment

The title of this paper references the work of English writer Woolf, 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf's writing is considered a classic feminist treatise on women's rights and basic needs (Brody, 2011; Coleman, 2012; Filimon, 2009; Lemaster, 2012). Woolf argues that women's empowerment comes from the acquisition of financial independence and a private (physical) space—a 'room of their own' (Filimon, 2009, p. 26) in which they can work for themselves apart from the demands of husbands, children or others and pursue their

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