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EIP-AGRI Focus Group

New entrants into farming: lessons to foster innovation and entrepreneurship

MINIPAPER: Gender issues among new entrants - 01 12 2015

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Introduction: The gender question

In the EIP Agri Focus Group on new entrants to farming, it became evident that identified new entrants to farming were often women (i.e. women were more commonly identified as the primary farmer than is characteristic of the agriculture sector in general). Historically, in most regions of Europe, women working on farms are more commonly identified as the 'farmer's wife' or employee. The observation that women are more likely to be new entrants (although the majority of new entrants still appear to be male) raised questions about the associated implications and evidence.

- What motivates women to establish new farms? How does this vary geographically?
- Are women more likely to be new entrants, or are they simply more visible on new entrant farms (i.e. because of the type of farm business work they perform)?
- What are the characteristics of new farms established by women? How does this differ from the characteristics of new farms established by men? How does this vary geographically? Are there differences between agricultural sectors?
- Is the new entrant phenomenon empowering to women? Or does it reinforce traditional gender roles around food provisioning and public interactions?
- What forms of agriculture are appealing to women?
- Are rural development activities more likely to be run by women?
- Could the gender issue related to new entrants enforce a paradigm shift?

As made evident in the Focus Group's initial discussion paper (Sutherland, 2015), there is no systematic body of research which addresses the new entrant phenomenon, and therefore no specific research addressing the question of gender in relation to new entrants. In this discussion paper we assemble the available information relating to gender and new entrants to farming, often by bringing in literature which addresses groups of farmers where new entrants are known to be more common (e.g. organic farming, back-to-the-land movements). There is also a substantial literature on women in farming, which we are not able to review as a whole. Instead, recent pieces of this research are integrated to inform discussion about successors and traditional gender roles in farming. Critical analysis of gender in relation to the new entrant phenomenon underpins the assessment of gender equality and the impact of gender distinctions on the development of the agriculture sector. Particularly interesting is the understanding of both a) women's motivations, and to what extent they are diverse from men's motivations, and also, b) what women new entrants do in particular that is particularly relevant for success as new entrants in farming, in the start phase or in consolidation.

This paper focuses on Europe, but there is considerable evidence of gender differences amongst poor, small-scale farmers in Africa (http://www.farmingfirst.org/women_infographic). These issues are not restricted to new entrants.

Defining 'female new entrants'

The definition of female new entrants is subject to the same limitations as defining new entrants in general. Distinguishing sole holders under the age of 35 or 40 who are women is straightforward, and achievable through Eurostat figures. It becomes more challenging when other family members are involved – can a woman with no previous agricultural experience be considered a new entrant if she is married to a farming successor? What about female successors who return to farming after an off-farm career? What if both partners are new entrants and active in the business, but only one can be identified as the 'primary farmer'? This latter case may hide many female new entrants: starting a farm, coming from another background and activity area, is often a shared project (e.g. couple or family) but only one individual is registered as the farmer – women may be as important for the farm and the new business as their husbands or partners. Alternatively, tax and subsidy incentives oriented towards enabling women to become farmers might lead to false reporting of women as the primary decision-makers.

State of the art: What do we know about gender in relation to new entrants

Women in EU Agriculture

An EU Agricultural Economic Brief from 2012 reported that women formed 42% of the total European agricultural labour force in 2007, representing just over 11 million people. Almost 60% of these women work in the members states with the largest agricultural sectors: Romania (27% of all EU agricultural employment), Poland (21st) and Italy (11%). However, only 29% of farm holders were reported to be women in 2007. There is an indication that this number is rising in the older member states, where the percentage of female farm holders was just 19% in 1990. Women are more likely to be working part-time in agriculture, but less likely to have other gainful activities than male farm holders. There is a considerable difference in the types of other gainful activities carried out by women however; although most other gainful activities involve using farm resources (e.g. machinery) or products and are carried out by men, women are far more likely to be involved in processing of farm products. The age structure of women in agriculture is also different – women are less likely to be under 35 or over 65, suggesting that they are more focused on child care in their early lives, and retire from farm work at younger ages than their male counterparts. Holdings managed by women also tend to be smaller, and produce different commodities. Examples given in the brief include the findings that women manage only 13% of specialist dairy holdings but 25% of those specialising in oilseeds.

Women in farm diversification

The Eurostat findings are generally consistent with the academic literature, which consistently demonstrates that women are more likely to be involved in specific types of farm diversification. The distinction most likely involves the difference between contracting of farm machinery (the most common form of other gainful activity in the UK - McNally, 2001 - which is most commonly performed by men) – and less common, public-facing forms of farm diversification (such as agri-tourism, local market selling) which are more likely to be performed by women (Trauver, 2004). Grubbström et al. (2014) similarly identified these patterns in the future intentions of agricultural students in Sweden (i.e. female students mentioned cheese production and activities for visiting school classes whereas male students identified machine related activities as preferred diversification activities). However, they also found that female students did not necessarily see their farming future as that of 'farming wife' but as farmers in their own right.

In an American study, Barbieri and Mahoney (2009) found that a relative high percentage (28.6%) of the wives of the male principal operators exclusively worked on their farm's diversified operations; this is consistent with earlier findings about the active role of farm women in agricultural diversification (e.g. Bock, 2004; McNally, 2001). Seuneke and Bock (2015) found that women on farms were more 'flexible' in their identity construction (i.e. were less committed to mainstream farming activities) and thus were more likely to pursue diversification activities than their partners. Barbieri and Mahoney's (2009) study also found that some 62% of their respondents were first generation farmers, about half of whom had first retired from another job or profession (i.e. were new entrants, but not necessarily young). Dutch research by Bock (2004) found that farm women tended to undertake smaller scale diversification activities, preferring these to be part-time and fit in around household and childcare activities. However, in following entrepreneurial activities over time, she found that economic success and emotional rewards often led to subsequent business expansion.

Women in alternative agriculture

Wilbur (2013) sites historical research by Schmitt (2005) demonstrating the 'astonishing' number of female researchers who were involved in the establishment of alternative agricultural science (i.e. early biodynamic and organic agriculture). Subsequent academic work has demonstrated that organic and biodynamic farming is disproportionately likely to be taken up by new entrants, and by women (in comparison to conventional farming).

In Southern Europe the role of women in new types of agriculture or new network relations seems to be particularly determinant. In Portugal, a national study on innovative models which intensify and diversify short supply chains, has shown how women are often those who innovate in their farm, by diversifying outside production more than within production, and also that it is primarily women who create and maintain dynamic local networks (Pinto-Correia et al., 2012). These women may have their partner/husband working with them in the farm, but it is women who promote the innovation, are responsible for contacts, and for marketing their products and services offered at the farm. In most cases, these women which take part in short supply chains as farm producers, are new entrants, mainly with an urban background, or a rural background but with many years of urban life. Seuneke and Bock (2015) similarly found that women in the Netherlands facilitate the adoption of new practices and learning on farms by engaging in diversification activities.

In assessing the role of women in 'back-to-the-land' movements in Italy, Wilbur (2013) found that although women were heavily involved in the farming operations, in many cases they were even more involved in household chores than they had been prior to their relocation. This had to do with the labour-intensive nature of low input agriculture, and greater abilities of their male partners to take on physically demanding jobs. However, while adopting these traditional roles, women remain highly visible on these farms, as their activities involved organising farmers' market stalls, organising volunteers and providing for bed and breakfast customers.

The prevalence of women in alternative agriculture is also emphasized in Monllor's PhD thesis (2011), undertaken in Spain. She found that 53% of the newcomers in the thesis sample were women, compared to 15% of the women in the group of young farmers that succeeded their family farms. The group of new entrant women were found to be more involved in organic production and direct marketing, implementing more alternative models of production and marketing. Binimelis et al. (2008) also identified women as key actors in the agroecological movement in Catalonia and Spain. They emphasized how some farm women are creating new discourses related with a vibrant rural areas and a harmonic relation with nature and agriculture. Those women were pursuing a local food system that provided safe food for their communities.

Gender and succession

There is evidence in UK research that the propensity of successors to be male is the result of socialization processes. Patrilineal succession has been the pattern in the UK (Errington and Gasson, 1993). Fischer (2009) found that female farm children were typically not socialized into active farming roles; boys would be called upon to undertake farming activities such as driving tractors and working with livestock, whereas girls would be called upon less frequently, and for less important tasks. Fischer argued that owing to the lack of active engagement in farming activities, young women on farms did not develop a self-identity as successors and therefore did not pursue farming for themselves, thus feeding into the cycle of marginalization from the farming enterprise. This cycle was typically led by the primary (male) farmer but condoned by his wife. Fischer did not address socialization processes outside of agriculture, but it is reasonable to assume that new entrants with no experience of agriculture (as is the topic of this focus group) would not have the opportunity to be socialized into gender roles relating to farming activities, although they may be socialized into traditional gender roles surrounding household activities and other forms of employment. Women entering agriculture as new entrants could thus reasonably be expected to be less constrained by traditional roles.

Why women become farmers

Women returning to rural areas are often searching for a better quality of life for their families. Wilbur (2013) – for back-to-the-landers (of both genders), argues that it is about escape from employment hierarchies,

consumer culture and anxieties about social status. Unpublished data from Southern Portugal demonstrated that women are often more actively concerned with quality of life (their own and of their families). In this study, the women were found to be not career-oriented: if they have had a professional life, it is less frequent that they have a specific professional career which is difficult to leave behind – they are therefore more prone to change lifestyle in the middle of their life, and to start a totally different project, in a rural setting. In this Portuguese research, it is speculated that these non-career oriented women may be more prone to actively search for change in their lives. The study also observes that it may be that traditionally ‘feminine’ characteristics (e.g. informal networking, multitasking and multifunctional organization, of adaptation and flexibility), can make them stronger new entrants into particular types of farming (e.g. those that require direct marketing), than their male counterparts.

In contrast, evidence from Greece suggests that the unwillingness of young women to live in rural areas limits the entrance of women to farming, as well as the establishment of new entrant farming households (Gidakou et al., 2007). Discussion during the focus group suggested that the lack of socialization into conventional agriculture may be key to the motives of women entering farming. Whereas women within long-term farming households have often been socialized into the roles of wife and mother, rather than ‘farmer’ (Seuneke and Bock, 2015), women entering agriculture without these experiences are more likely to have been socialized into egalitarian perspectives on gender roles. The fact that the new enterprises are more likely to be ‘alternative’ may reflect social shifts towards valuing local food production and interaction with nature, as well as the practicalities of establishing a viable enterprise (i.e. many new entrants cannot afford to establish mainstream conventional farming systems).

Is new entrance to farming empowering for women?

The visibility of women in alternative agricultural approaches suggests that they are playing stronger leadership roles than in conventional farming systems. The literature is consistent that women are much more likely to be identified as the primary farmer in their own right, within these alternative systems. As such, new entrance could be considered empowering by virtue of the visibility given to women (Baylina and García Ramon, 2001). However, the marginalisation of alternative farming practices in relation to mainstream conventional farming nuances this assumption. Is it empowering to be visible in a field which has traditionally been dismissed by mainstream farmers as inconsequential? Or which women have always played major roles? Participants in the focus group questioned whether the lower status of alternative agriculture was less of a concern for women, who have traditionally been marginalised in any case.

Som Castellano (2015) argues in an American study that involvement of women in alternative agricultural practices relates to continuation of traditional gender roles surrounding food provisioning (i.e. that women have traditionally been responsible for food provisioning; this practice is continued by participants in alternative food networks). She sites other research demonstrating that women are more likely to visit farmers’ markets, participate in Community Support Agriculture programmes and buy local food. She suggests that participation in alternative food networks reinforces traditional gender roles within the home, and is therefore not empowering. Wilbur (2013) in his Italian study similarly found that women tended to adopt more traditional gender roles when going ‘back-to-the-land’. There is a discourse in the gender literature around ‘empowerment’ and the freedom to adopt traditional gender roles which is beyond the scope of this paper. In essence, it is the freedom to make this choice that is the issue.

Examples from practice

An article by Tim Rowley (2013) in the Telegraph (a British newspaper) described the following women who were new entrants to farming:

- Sarah Simpson: formerly worked at accountancy firm, now running a 300-acre cattle farm. She is a ‘delayed successor’ – the farm had been in her family since 1935, but she had never planned to be a successor, instead moving away and starting a family. She decided to pursue farming after surviving cancer.

- Jenny Clarkson: raised on a farm, and worked as a meat inspector. She gave up her job to return to the family farm and establish 'Just Jenny's Farmhouse Icecream', a diversification enterprise on her father's dairy farm.
- Anne Cianchi: from a non-farming background; established 'Emma's Pig's after her daughter asked to raise a pig and the whole family became interested. The family established a web-site and now sells bacon around the world.

In her PhD thesis, Monllor identified these examples:

- Caitlin: an urban girl, first became interested in food and farming from an environmental perspective. She has a BES in Environment and Resource Studies from the University of Waterloo. She has owned her farm since 2010, where she produces organic vegetables, free range eggs, pastured chickens, Berkshire pork and grass-fed Angus beef. She is involved with a variety of food and farming related initiatives (Ontario, Canada) <http://www.reroot.ca/>
- Sara: an urban girl living in Barcelona. She wanted to be a farmer since she was a child, so she went to study organic agriculture at college. Since graduating, she has been practicing in different farms and trying to begin her own farm. After some years she is now established and producing local and organic vegetables (Catalonia, Spain) <http://vessana.pagesosagroecologics.com/>
- Anna: a city woman. She worked as journalist but one day she decided to take over the dairy farm of her grandfather. She converted the farm to organic production and she also began to process the milk into yogurt. Currently she is closely linked to local schools. She has introduced organic yogurt in several school of the regions and also shops and restaurants (Catalonia, Spain) <http://www.gastroteca.cat/ca/fitxa-oncomprar/la-selvatana/>
- Examples from farm surveys in Southern Portugal

Ana Carla: a countryside woman who moved to Lisbon at an early age. She studied psychology and had her life organized in Lisbon, together with her foreign husband and their children. At the age of 40 she inherited a large family farm in Southern Portugal. She decided to change her lifestyle, move to the farm, and convert into organic farming. The husband moved with her, but their children stayed in Lisbon. She farms organically and processes some of her produce, which she sells directly to a network of clients in the region. She also organizes short courses at the farm.

Carla: an urban woman, from Lisbon, where her parents had moved to, from the countryside. The family farm was still managed in the family. Carla has studied economy and had a job in the city. When she inherited the farm, aged 33 and single, she decided that nothing really attached her to the town, and changed her lifestyle, moving to the countryside and settling on the family farm. She learned how to manage a large estate, by asking advice and learning by doing. She is producing cattle in the Montado system.

Catarina: an urban woman, trained agronomist. By studying and collecting information she became interested, and acquired knowledge, on organic agriculture, then on permaculture. She works as farm adviser. She convinced her husband, a journalist, that they should start their own production. They moved into a large estate, where they acquired a land use contract for 10 hectares of land – former grazing land, with poor and shallow soil. They started by a large investment in time and work, in improving the soil organic matter applying the k-line method. They produce vegetables and have planted fruit trees. Catarina sells directly to customers in the Lisbon area, where she drives once a week to sell their products.

Potential research topics

- How does the role of women in alternative farming systems differ from that of women in conventional farming systems? Why is this?
- Is becoming a 'farmer' empowering for women? Does this depend on the type or size of farm?
- Direct marketing: a gender issue? Food relations between urban and rural women
- Rural development policies and female new entrants
- Are women new entrants primarily in some sectors (horticulture, cheese, etc)

- Are 'female' skills especially relevant for being resilient new entrants into farming?

Recommendations and messages for advisors, markets, local authorities

It was agreed at the second focus group meeting that each minipaper would summarise their findings into recommendations, which would then be collated into documents targeted towards advisors, markets and local authorities.

- Engaging with new entrants to farming could align with broader strategies relating to gender equality
- It may be appropriate to track the participation of both genders in events and activities as part of evaluation processes
- Research into new entrant support needs should target multiple members of households, rather than a single 'primary farmer'
- The issue of gender is not particularly suited to operationalisation through operational groups. An operational group could potentially test out new rural development policies oriented to enabling more women to become farmers.

Some reflections...

Owing to the limited research specifically addressing new entrants, it is very difficult to assess issues relating to gender. It appears evident that women are indeed highly visible in alternative agricultural systems, and as new entrants in their own right, but it is not clear to what degree this reflects empowerment, or the increasing role of women in agriculture more broadly. Discussion in the group suggested that women may be more visible amongst new entrants simply because they are a reflection of broader changes in society – not socialised into conventional farmers'-wife roles, their participation simply reflects the more visible presence of women as leaders and business people in their own right, which characterises contemporary society.

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