

MICHIGAN STATE  
UNIVERSITY

# Farm Women & the Pursuit of Empowerment

## Cases from United States & France

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# Farm Women Growing

## France

- 27% of farmers are women
  - up from 8% in 1970
- Older than men (54 vs. 51)
  - Under 40:
  - (1) More educated (44% v. 32%)
  - (2) Smaller farms
- More likely to hold part-time job
- Carry less debt
- Farms more diversified when women involved.
- Women, pioneers in agritourism initiatives.

## United States

- 30% of farmers are women
  - up from 14% in 2002
- Older than men (59 vs. 54)
  - Under 40:
  - (1) More educated
  - (2) Smaller farms
- More likely to hold part time job
- Carry less debt
- Farm later in life
- Farms more diversified when women involved.
- Women, pioneers in agritourism initiatives.

# The Historical Case: Visibility

- In the context of family farms, women have had:
  - 1) less access to material resources,
    - land, capital, technology
  - 2) less social status
  - 3) less power
    - to make decisions
- Results:
  - Women's inequalities
  - “A very biased view of agricultural history”  
(Alston 2003:166).



# The Historical Case: Visibility

- Invisibility and unequal treatment maintained by:
  - 1) Legal system
  - 2) Persistence of a patriarchal ideology and strong heterosexism (Women = “incomplete farmers”).

## CHANGE???

- Undoing existing gender arrangements in agriculture requires a reshuffling of power relations and the reframing of discourses surrounding gender.

## Emergence of new 'entrepreneurialism'

- Redefining farming as a 'new rural space' ...consumptive space
  - Education, Respite, Entertainment/tourism
  - Quality of life/spirituality/relationship with nature
  - Systems/holism



# The Farm Experience Economy

The 'New ag'  
Sustainable ag  
- under late capitalism

## DIRECT MARKET

- Farm Stands
- U-Pick
- Community Supported Agriculture

## RECREATION/EVENT

- Farm weddings
- Horseback Riding
- Corn Maze
- Walking trails
- Camping
- Concerts
- Festivals
- Picnicking
- Dinners
- Community Theater
- Retreats

## EDUCATION

- Farm tours
- Classes
- Workshops
- Tastings (wine)
- Farm stays
- Field trips
- Historical Exhibits



# New Gender Relations Emerging

Literature portrays new production forms as providing an opportunity for farm women's empowerment:

- ❖ Community-supported agriculture

- ❖ “Feminine form of empowerment ... a social and physical space within which relationships of everyday life and experiences, can be variously expressed” (Delind and Ferguson, 1999: 198)

- ❖ Sustainable Agriculture

- ❖ “New spaces of empowerment & resistance” (Trauger, 2004:290)

# NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

“Are women the future of agriculture?” (Groult, 2010)

“Women in agriculture: The status of women evolves and agriculture gains”  
(Le Sillon, 2010).

“Farm women breaking the ‘grass’ ceiling?” (Doering, 2013 [US])

## OUR RESEARCH INTERESTS:

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*To what are we to attribute this new visibility?  
How are farm women participating in agriculture?*

*Are they using their position to:  
1) Use agriculture to further their own empowerment?*





# *in Ag*



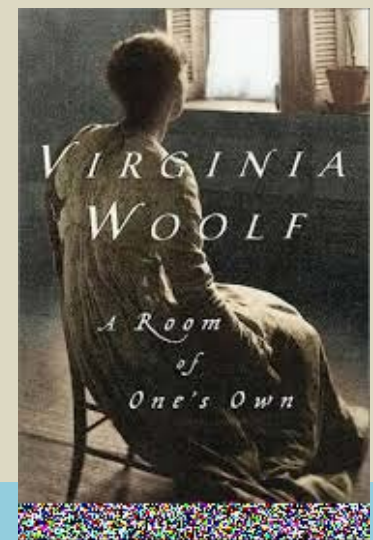
# *“Empowerment”*

## Theoretical Orientation

### From V. Woolf

*“Empowerment”* made possible by :

1. Acquiring financial resources and a personal (physical) space,
2. Making visible in the public sphere women’s abilities and skills they perform in the private sphere.



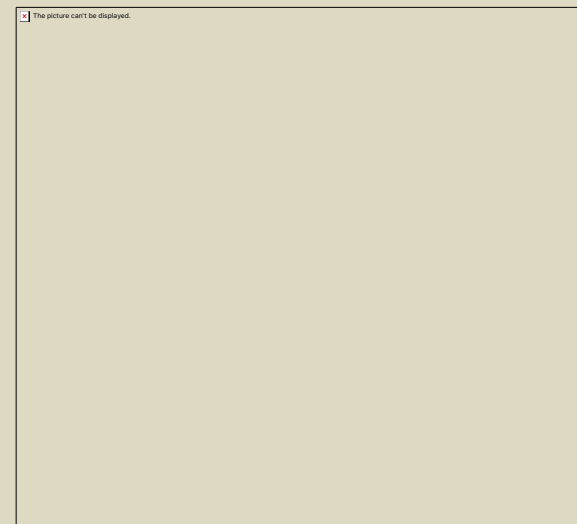
(Filimon, 2009; Brody, 2011; Woolf, 1925; 1929)

# “Empowerment” Theoretical Orientation

## From Development Literature:

1. Not a state, but a dynamic and on-going process.
2. Process of gaining agency = ability to define one’s goals and act upon them.
3. Empowerment = gain of power
  - Not “power over” but...
  - “power to”, “power with,” and “power within”

*Highest level of empowerment*



*Lower level of empowerment*

# Empowerment

## Working Definition

- Power over implies relations of domination and subordination
- The power to improve one's conditions
  - To access resources, make decisions, exercise authority, seek solutions
- The opportunity to exercise power with others
  - Collectively organize to pursue goals
- The ability to cultivate and nurture power within the self
  - Become reflexive

# Empowerment:

- Transformative
- Dynamic and on-going process
- Inherently a personal process
- Yet, conditions for empowerment can be constructed

## Empowerment Context

- Our attention is on the CONTEXT in which actions are taken that facilitate this process.
  - *Can value-added agriculture (VAAG) create the conditions to facilitate empowerment?*

**Value-added agriculture (VAAG) is the process of adding economic or social value to a raw agriculture product or commodity through differentiation.**

## Value-Added Agriculture

### Examples:

- ❖ Processing production into alternate form (jam, jelly, pie, bread, etc)
- ❖ Direct Sales
- ❖ Producing organically; certification programs

# FINDINGS *at a glance*

- France & US
  - VAAG can provide the context for empowerment
    - Power To
      - More visible
      - Women as Mentors/Socialization agents
      - Access to farmland
      - Knowledge & skills
      - Early Careers
    - Power With
      - Cultivate social relations
      - Educate
    - Power Within
      - Sense of self
      - Professional identity

# French Farm Women

Case study of a farm women network “*Réseau de Visites de Ferme*” – Aveyron region

- Created in 1993
- Farm tour & ‘snack’
- Farms specialize in the sheep milk production (Roquefort)





# Michigan Farm Women





# 'Power to' act



- Intentional path to Farming
  - US farmers made career choice rather than marrying into farm

“As a nurse, I had the chance to see so many illnesses, and I began to see food as so important to health. Gradually I started raising herbs and then it became a business, but it has always been MY business, but he is supportive.” (Rita)

“I had to work as a medical professional for many years to save enough money.” (Rhonda)

“I’m the boss around here. I was farming this land and running the farm stand before we got married. I started at around 16 years old. My husband always worked off the farm, but he helps on the weekend.” (Grace)



# 'Power to' act

- French farmers marry into farming yet acquire material resources (barn) to realize their farm goals.
  - The BARN, their physical and symbolic space.

*“He [my husband] let me set up my project alone. The first year, there was still hay in the barn because of the cold. With the money I had, I installed electricity, I restored the main room. This money was my money. It was not farm money. I set up my account. I have always had a separate account for my visits. With the money I had, I always manage to do what I wanted.”*

# The Barn: A Room of Her Own?





*Vive  
le patrimoine!*







# 'Power to' act

- French women acquire new knowledge & skill development

*“A company from Toulouse came and trained us. They explained us the type of tour we should give to people. They taught us how to organize a visit, how to explain, how to create a tour, a snack, how to have people taste our produce.”*













# 'Power to'

- US farmers assessing Resources/skills
  - Land and capital from her inheritance or second career
  - Matriarchal Influence



“I could not have done it if it weren’t for my parents. Using the farm to make money was my mother’s idea, and they helped us buy the farm when they retired.”  
- Grace, 78

“We kids were expected to work along with her; so a few years later when I got married Mom decided to retire and she asked me if I wanted to take it over.”

- Melissa, 63



# 'Power with'

- Empowerment as a collective exercise
  - Brings together people with complementary interests
- US farmers cultivate power with others, meeting needs
  - Desire for personal connections; community
  - Education

Farm:  
Economic & Civic  
instrument

“It was important to me to build a farm that was open to the public so that we could share our land with other people.” (Charlotte)

“I’m not interested in raising corn like other farmers; I’m a people person. I need to talk to people.” (Grace)

“We are here to educate and connect with city dwellers and to help them experience a little slice of rural life” (Jackie).



# ‘Power with’

- French farmers express alienation & social isolation

*“I was a nurse. Of course, I had the kids, but at home, at times I was bored. It was important for me to have relationships. I thought that creating this activity, welcoming people of the farm, would help me to recreate these relationships I was missing. When I was a nurse, I really enjoyed interacting with other people. Then, I ended up on a farm, milking sheep, taking care of lamb births... you know, a ewe does not speak too much.”*



# ‘Power with’

- Limited economical benefits, but...
- Social capital/interactions enhanced and improved.

*“My neighbors, they tell me that it looks like so much work. They only see this side. It’s hard work, it’s true, but it’s also a satisfaction. Interactions are so important! It’s so important to be able to interact with people from everywhere.”*





- French women network as a support group; facilitating knowledge sharing.

*“Being in the network allowed me to feel less isolated; I was with people who knew this activity. I gained/saved time. Also, a network is always a strength...They had knowledge to share, and it fitted what I wanted to do.”*





# ‘Power within’

- Does VAAG foster a stronger sense of self; increase reflexivity?
  - US women report socio-psychological benefits

“I find it fun and I think it is important work and I am good at it. It gives me a lot of pride to share my knowledge and have others take our life here seriously.”

“It makes me feel good to educate people and know I helped them develop as a person.”

“Food evangelism” ... “God wants me to be here, to do this work. I see this as a ministry of care as I connect with others.”



# “Power within”

- French women: Crafting a new professional identity = women as agricultural professionals
  - Status reversal: Women = authority; men = helper.

*“I explain everything, births, lambs’ sales, milk control, old ewe’s sales - the entire production cycle . . . I start the automatic feeder to show them how it works. After, I go into the milking room where I start the milking machines ...we speak about what happens with the milk and its process into Roquefort cheese...about the milk, its components, all the sanitary controls, issues of traceability. It makes me feel good to show my expertise. They are quite impressed.”*



# 'Power within'

- Identity and the Body
  - Revealing themselves through their bodies by dressing to look the part of an authentic farmer.

*"Maybe they were expecting someone older...They tell me that they were not expecting a modern, dynamic woman like me."*



*"Sometimes the kids tell me they want to see the farmwoman. I tell them I am the farmwoman. It is true that in kid's books the farmwoman is more likely to appear with a scarf holding a basket."*



# VAAG as a Context for Empowerment

VAAG can provide the context for empowerment

Evidence of a personal physical and symbolic space

- **Power To**

- More visible
- Women as Mentors/Socialization agents
- Access to farmland
- Knowledge & skills
- Early Careers

- **Power With**

- Cultivate social relations
- Educate

- **Power Within**

- Socio-psychological benefits
- Professional identity





# Limitations? ... Yes

Not necessarily a challenge to unequal power relations between men and women.

1. A limited acquisition of power... which does not challenge patriarchal and heterosexist ideology.
2. French women's farming often perceived as secondary to the farm.
3. US and French women demonstrate an involvement in traditional gender roles and an 'essentialism' of women's skills.

*Toward less empowerment*



# Visible, but still marginalized

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://pinktractor.com/farming-smarts/women-in-ag.aspx>. The browser's address bar also shows search results for "women in ag - Google Search" and "Women in Ag | Women Far...".

The website header features a navigation menu with the following items: [home](#), [farm girl shop](#), [farming smarts](#) (highlighted), [equipment smarts](#), and [farm girl family](#). Below the navigation menu is a search bar and social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and YouTube.

The main content area includes a featured article titled "Drones in Ag" with a sub-header "Q & A". The article features a woman in an orange shirt standing in a field with a drone flying above her. Another article titled "Hands On Learning" shows a woman sitting on a tractor. A third article, "CELEBRATING 150 Years OF STUART RANCH", features a woman in a cowboy hat holding a baby and a young child in a cowboy hat.

The website also includes a sidebar with a "Chicken Safe, Inc." advertisement for "Quality Housing For Chicken Safety" and a "FREE SHIPPING!" offer. The sidebar also lists features: "Treated Timber Door", "17 Gauge Welded Mesh", and "All Sizes Can Be Extended To Any Length".





**ANNIE'S PROJECT**

**EMPOWERING WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE**



# Conclusion

- Value added agriculture presents uneven opportunities for empowerment
  - Openings, but persistent constraints
- More empirical research needed.
  - Results might differ by region, the presence of competing economic opportunities, or VAG type.
- Is farm women's empowerment contingent upon redefining the family farm context as the pillar of French & US agriculture?

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