Reconstructing the Farm: Life Stories of Dutch Female Farmers
Marisa Turesky
Brandeis University

Abstract
My research asks: what are the lived experiences of female farmers in a Dutch agricultural community like the Netherlands? Although popular culture portrays most female farmers as uneducated individuals of lower socioeconomic status, the six women who I interviewed in the Netherlands over the course of a short ethnographic research study present life stories that complicate this stereotype. In my conversations with female farm owners in the Netherlands, it emerged that a patriarchal paradigm appears to persist in industrial, conventional agriculture, seeming to encourage larger numbers of women to own more small-scale farms. While there is substantial existing research on rural women’s historical roles in farming, I add additional layers to this work, through my analysis of the personal experiences of a small sample of women farmers in the contemporary Netherlands. These women, who consider farming their lifestyle, discuss their inspiration, challenges, successes, and passion for their chosen occupation. In attempting to balance traditional roles of labor versus domesticity, these women actively challenge the gender binary through experiences in motherhood and business ownership.

Keywords: Agriculture, Gender, Eco-feminism

Introduction
The role of Dutch women working on farms has shifted through the generations. Historically, Dutch women were key business partners in their husbands’ farming enterprises, but their roles and efforts were largely undervalued and under-recognized. Currently, women engaged in farming have responsibilities ranging from balancing work in the field with domestic duties inside of the home as part of a farming partnership, to complete ownership of the farm. Historically, women who owned farms were typically, although not always, the daughters of farmers and were continuing the tradition of the family farm. Female ownership, however, has never been as common as male ownership because women have often been stifled by economic and political reform that kept them dependent on a male partner. Although both husband and wife often worked on the farm together, the wife’s farm tasks were often undocumented because of the “Breadwinner’s Principle.” This meant that as long as the government had no record of the wife’s hourly contributions, the family only had one spousal income, which allowed them to receive social benefits and tax deductions (Geluk-Geluk 1994: 17).

As gender norms shift to allow for greater autonomy among women on farms, the established division of labor in the agricultural sector is becoming more dynamic and relatively more flexible. With the popularization of the sustainable and local food movement, more young progressives want to grow and, in some cases, distribute, their own food. Women who now work on farms may no longer have a fixed lifestyle based on traditional gender roles, with responsibilities limited to agriculture and domestic duties. They are, moreover, no longer as strongly linked to familial patterns of ownership.

In this article I argue that, in attempting to balance agricultural labor with domestic work, this new generation of female farmers actively challenge the gender binary through their cultivation of alternative roles of motherhood and independent business ownership. In my
fieldwork, conducted in the Fall of 2011 I focused on female farm-owners located in the Netherlands. I conducted research to understand these women’s past experiences, their future aspirations, and their current (and increasing) autonomy and prestige within small-scale agriculture. While my analysis is not necessarily generalizable to the experiences of every female farmer in the country, the stories I collected do promote a greater understanding of the women who produce a portion of the nation’s food. In so doing, this research can contribute to a greater understanding between producers and consumers. I also hope to contribute to the creation of a community for Dutch female farmers, women who may read these few testimonies and find solace that they are not alone in this kind of lifestyle and work. The six women in my study speak to such diversity within a single niche of society (van der Burg 1994:125). Although most of the women with whom I spoke would not overtly acknowledge their role in pushing feminist political ecology forward, this research strives to illuminate their perceptions of themselves as female farmers in a traditionally masculine field, as well as their implicitly feminist stances towards this structure of power.

The women farmers who I met throughout my research came from different types of farms. The Netherlands has two primary categories of farms: conventional farms and biological farms. A conventional, non-biological farm tends to see rural nature as an obstacle to overcome; utilizing scientific, technological and genetic advancements to maximize profit through continued scale enlargement (Sonnino 2008: 30). Non-biological farmers typically use hormones, antibiotics, pesticides and herbicides on their farms. Biological farms, by contrast, tend to practice a more holistic approach that maximizes farm-derived renewable resources, coordinating with the natural systems that consider the social and ecological impacts of the production cycle (Acs 2004: 2-3). During informal conversations with current and past students of both the conventional and biological farm school, they noted the higher percentage of women attending Warmonderhof, the biological farm school, versus the higher percentage of men attending Dronten University, the neighboring conventional farm school. As I will explore in this article, the motivation for having a certain kind of farm depended on various factors in a farmer’s life experiences.

Through writing about these women’s stories and building relationships with them, I cultivate a greater understanding of cross-cultural femininity in agriculture. This article considers the lived experiences of female farmers within the hegemonic construction of the male Dutch farmer in the Netherlands, also considering the ways in which their roles may have shifted through the years. Janet McIntosh’s definition of hegemony is quite useful here, for she builds on the world of John and Jean Comaroff by arguing that hegemony “consists of the signs and practices that typically serve the interest of the dominant group by reflecting or justifying particular relations of power and that come to be ‘taken-for-granted [by all social groups] as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it’” (McIntosh 2009: 23). These women reconstruct femininity in relation to hegemonic views of the male Dutch Farmer through their desire to deviate from norms and thus recreate norms of both the female and the farmer. As such, contrary to the stereotypes of female farmers as poor, domestic wives/servants in rural environments, the women who I worked and spoke with tended to be academically, politically, and ecologically informed. They actively, not passively, chose to farm.¹

¹ The women’s decisions to work on their farms and live rurally on a traditional, family farm should be distinguished from the more American, urban “back to land” movement that builds on an idealistic pastoral life.
Methodology: A Day on the Farm

This article is the result of an intensive one-month ethnographic research study in which I conducted interviews with six female farmers living throughout the Netherlands. These interviews, conducted in English, were semi-structured and open-ended, which allowed me to follow the leads of my interlocutors. They lasted between one and three hours, depending on the interlocutor. My investigation of female farmers is also based on participant observation, from data that I gathered while watching and listening to the women work. Working with the women on the farm gave me the chance to know and learn from them in their homes and work spaces. Spending more time with the interviewees during their work allowed these women to express their lives and opinions to me in a casual setting. My time with the interviewees ranged from two-hour visits to overnight stays. I used the snowball method of recruitment and began my recruitment through local agricultural advocacy organizations.

Meet the Farmers

Anne, 45 & Anouk, 42

Anne and Anouk, life partners who only recently started cohabiting, live on the milk farm they started roughly two years ago along with forty cows, all of whom have names. The two explained that even though they are unique as lesbian farmers, they do not want to be identified only by their sexuality because it is not a defining part of their identity. Anouk has been farming since she was a young child, while Anne is a relative novice. Though both had grandparents

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2 Initially, I traveled to the Netherlands to study gender and sexuality with the School of International Training. Shortly after arriving, I began working with Dutch agricultural advocacy organizations such as ASEED and Farming The City.

3 All the names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.
who were farmers, neither Anne nor Anouk grew up on a farm. In Anouk’s case, however, she always found her way to a farm, even as a young child. They each told me, on separate occasions, that farming is a “way of life” and they truly love farming because “it is in our blood.”

Tjarda, 53
Growing up near her grandfather’s farm, Tjarda has had a long-standing connection to the farmland, which she now owns. The government, however, constantly threatens to take her vegetable and fruit farm to convert it into a concrete park, due to the farm’s proximity to the city. As she and I stood overlooking the land, the farm stood in stark contrast to the highway and industries just behind it. Tjarda runs a care farm – in other words, the government provides her extra funds for taking on individuals who need extra supervision or “care” in their work (this might be due to intellectual impairment, addiction, or other disabilities). Until she took over the farm, Tjarda had various jobs, ranging from social work to viticulture [grape cultivation]. As long as she can protect the farm, Tjarda’s ideal future is to continue farming.

Kim, 37
Kim and her husband have taken over her parents’ conventional dairy farm with 80 cows and 500 goats, typically with only one farm hand’s help. Although we talked at her new house a few kilometers from the farm, Kim gave me a virtual tour with a framed photo of the farm. She told me how much she used to enjoy going to pubs and parties but now her focus is on motherhood and the farm. Kim initially pursued higher education but decided that she wanted to work with her hands. Her family is very important to her and she brought up her sorrow concerning her parents’ recent divorce, her close relationship with her brothers, and her immense admiration for her mother. Her immediate family lives so close together that a few minutes before I left her
house, Kim’s brother came over for a surprise visit. She assured me that this was quite common. Kim has a hard time thinking about the future because her parents are heavily invested in the farm and the effects of their imminent divorce remain unclear. She, however, hopes to remain a farmer until she is either physically or economically restricted from doing so.

Iris, 34
Having grown up in both the suburbs and the city, Iris has experienced agriculture from an advocacy and production perspective. She studied environmental studies at university and quickly became enthralled with biological farming. Iris and a friend were spontaneously inspired to start their own farm upon completing an internship. After struggling for support and funds, the two young women started their biological vegetable farm. They work about ten hours per day and have eight volunteers. With a subtly pregnant stomach, Iris told me that the only kind of farm on which she would work is a biological farm because biological farms improve the environment for future generations. As the youngest farmer with whom I spoke, Iris is unsure what the future will bring but knows that it will have something to do with agriculture.

Stephanie, 60
Stephanie grew up on a farm with her parents and five siblings. She made the conscious decision to attend university and wanted nothing to do with farming. After spending time in Chile for agriculturally based social justice work, she came back to the Netherlands and settled in Amsterdam. She eventually, however, returned to farming after realizing her deep-seated adoration for it. She relies on her customers – school children who tour the farm and consume her products – to garner support in her daily life. When she and her husband were first married, they took over her husband’s parents’ cheese farm. Unfortunately, soon after that, the city took away the land around this 400-year-old farm in order to build a bridge. As a result, Stephanie and her husband were forced to rebuild their business and biological farm elsewhere. Now, they live in a Gaudí-style4 home on their land, along with 65 cows. Stephanie says that she is still looking for her path within her farming life.

First Steps Towards a Farming Lifestyle
Most of the women struggled to maintain social and economic support when they were starting their farms. Because of the rampant stereotypes of gendered agriculture that reinforce the gender binary, each woman worked very hard to achieve recognition and legitimacy from their communities, both personally and agriculturally. For Anouk and Anne, support was particularly difficult to garner since Anouk had recently left her husband to live with Anne. Anouk elaborates:

A lot of people were against us. I left my husband and my children and blah blah blah. I took a lot of money out of that farm. That was the story that was going around. The people you thought were your friends just never showed up again. It made it extra hard. I invested already in [thirty] cows. A long time ago. They were on that farm. They were my cows. So, I just took them.

The reaction of her family and friends was not solely the result of her leaving her husband and his farm to start her own but, also related to the fact that she would start her own farm as a gay woman with her life partner. With little regard for others’ approval, Anouk and Anne started their

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4 Stephanie deliberately modeled her home after the works of Antoni Gaudí because his style reflected the organic shapes of nature.
farm with nothing more than thirty cows, twenty calves, and a goal. Unlike Anne and Anouk who bought their farm, Kim and Tjarda inherited their farms because others in their family did not want it.

When Tjarda took the opportunity to start an alternative agriculture business, her family was adamantly against her decision and even brought the case to court. She recalled the story as we strolled through her land. Like most of her anecdotes, she would begin her story but would often find herself distracted by an aspect of her farm and would excitedly find any excuse to talk about it. I would eventually pull her back to her more personal anecdotes. She would then smile, and poignantly resume her story:

There was this whole battle full of lying. And they said, ‘oh you can’t do it! You know nothing about it and you haven’t got money!’ And I thought, ‘aw well. I don’t know much about it’ so I went to look for an education. ...Then, there was still lying and they were trying to stop me. In 1996, I had my diploma and I got a tractor for my birthday. So, as I squatted in Amsterdam, I thought, ‘now we must start!’

From this and other anecdotes it was apparent that even once she began working on the farm, Tjarda’s family refused to take her seriously. Her aunt, who was one of the few supportive people in her venture, told her that if she had been a man she would not receive so much criticism and bigotry.

Indeed, farming is an industry that has been historically dominated by men, particularly in the Netherlands. In 2011, The Central Bureau for Statistics in the Netherlands calculated that less than ten years ago, there were well over twice as many men as women working on farms (CBS 2011: 38). Now, women average slightly more than one-third of the farming workforce. Technological developments tend to perpetuate such a gender dichotomy in the agricultural field. The industrial tractor was designed by and for men. It is the tool that re-engineered the way in which farmers conducted work and the levers and pedals are often too far away for most women to be able to adequately maneuver the machine (Stephanie Fisher 2010: 10 originally from Ann Rosenfeld, 1985: 23).

It was difficult enough that Iris’ parents were not initially proud of her decision to start a farm; the agricultural community had its own structural barriers and methods of discrimination, as well:

In the beginning, we were not taken seriously. We said that we wanted to buy a tractor and asked what they could give us with so much horsepower. Some people just didn’t know what to say to us. They just said nothing. Didn’t know how to react to women wanting to buy a tractor. They just didn’t know what to say. After, we laughed about it.

Iris told me this story as we stared out onto her bright red tractor, sitting in the yard. She told me that making jokes was the best way to cope with such gender biases. I had heard this same statement from other women. They explained that this is the key to not taking yourself or the agricultural field’s hyper-masculinity too seriously.

Iris’ story about prejudice in shopping for tractors has further implications. Every woman mentioned that one of her greatest challenges in farming is driving the tractor. It might seem that the heavy usage of machinery in conventional agriculture is a main reason why women’s farms are typically smaller than that of the average male-owned farm in the Netherlands. According to a 2007 study by the European Commission, Eurostat, regarding the labor force by the size of farms in the Netherlands, women account for 2.4% of the total sole owners of farms larger than 100 hectares versus their 7.5% ownership of farms smaller than twenty hectares.
According to Anouk and Anne, the most frequently asked question posed to them from people in agricultural businesses is, “Who drives the tractor? Do you hire a man for the tractor work?” The only reason why I knew to scoff at this question is because a few hours earlier, I had watched Anouk step into her industrial tractor and flawlessly drive it along the barn to feed their cows. In this instance, the tractor work was clearly failing to keep these women inside of the home.

Similarly to Iris, Anne and Anouk feel that the best way to cope with the conservative mentality is to laugh. Anne described another discriminatory moment:

I remember there was a knock on the door and the man said, ‘is the farmer home? Where’s the farmer?’ I told him, ‘Here I am!’ And he said ‘I mean the man of the house’. And I said, ‘we don’t have a man here.’ So he turned around and walked away. We never saw him again.

Stephanie told me a very similar story. She did the milking and the cheese-making every day, yet when salesmen came to the farm, they were always looking for “the boss” and they never meant her: “In the beginning, I always had the power to fight but then I got so tired. I tell them that we have the farm together but they don’t care.”

Hegemonic ideas, which could be reified by technological limitations like the tractor design, perpetuate a gender dichotomy in agricultural industrialization. Such a dichotomy often devalues women, giving rise to a larger number of small-scale farms run by women. Although many aspects of farming are becoming more gender-neutral, these women’s experiences show a vivid dichotomy in the endowed power of women and men on farms.
A Gendered Farm

You learned how work in teams. It's not a competition. You have to work together—Tjarda

The women I spoke with seek to create farms that are undoubtedly gendered but based on their own definitions. I turn to Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede (2005) in their definition of femininity because it helps to contextualize how these women define femininity in a positive and productive fashion in contrast to agriculturally defined feminine roles and spheres in a male-dominated field. Hofstede and Hofstede argue that a feminine culture can be defined as occurring when the values about gender roles overlap, where both men and women are expected to be modest, caring and concerned with the quality of life. Some of the women employ methods on their farm that are particularly feminine in this interpretation. For example, the biggest lesson that Tjarda brought back from grape farming in wine country was the importance of collaboration. She explained that, “You learned how to work in teams. It is not a competition. You have to work together. Lots of people can’t handle it. I like it!”

Iris hesitantly said that:

Maybe women have naturally different priorities than men. It’s just a thought. For men, it’s more about kilos, tons, tractors, and business. For us, we also have to be conscious about economics but we also have the volunteers. That’s much more working together with other people. That we are also socially active, you take care of people. That’s an element on our farm that’s important. I think that factors in to why you see volunteers at our farm.

Like Tjarda, Iris also emphasized collaboration as a key value in her successful farm and both women also saw this as particularly feminine. These women’s priority of collaboration allowed them to differentiate themselves in a man’s world by emphasizing men’s perceived narrow focus on values and themes like competition and material success. Linguistically this gendered focus on group cohesion and collaboration is also marked. For example, Stephanie alluded to normative male/female speech ideologies by saying “when the women speak, they say we do this but when the men speak then they say I do this.” She then continued to say that it is much more effective to speak about tasks and priorities in terms of “we.” In other words, the women concentrate on collectivity in their farm work, achieving this through both words and actions, as a way to define themselves differently from men.

Another distinguishing self-identification of these women, as female farmers, was their ability to multitask. Dutch popular culture and these women’s gender ideologies show that women in agriculture believe they have an advantage over men when it comes to doing more at once. Anne noted “girls are better milkers. [They are] more careful, more patient, and easy with the cows. No shouting, hitting. We can do two things at a time. Three... And a guy just can do one thing at a time.”

This idea was reiterated in a current Dutch television show, Melk en Honing, which broadcasted a preview of their show by presenting stories of young, Dutch women farmers who were taking over their fathers’ farm (van Santen, Marte: 2008). In a short preview of the series, they explain why they, as women, make better farmers than men. They explained that women tend to be more organized and can multi-task better than men. Tjarda independently noted multi-tasking and organization as necessary skills in running a farm because although it might be a lifestyle, farming is also a business. Managing the tasks with the livestock and/or produce is just as important as tending to the bills. Stephanie’s work with the publicity and cheese-making exemplifies how women might carve out desired skills as specifically gendered in order to work successfully in a male-dominated business. Their dispositions and values enable them
to create authentic and deserving roles in which they are distinguished from men and valued as female farmers.

Surprisingly, when I asked the women how they see their jobs as female farmers differing from those of the men, Kim and Tjarda’s verbal responses suggested that they do not claim to see any gendered differences. Kim said, “It’s not that I have to prove myself. No,” while Tjarda retorted my question, “I am a sort of man! I can’t get excited about clothes or anything.” Despite the valorization of femininity as demonstrated above, there remains a value of androgyny in which these women refuse to acknowledge a distinction in their job solely based on their gender. Simultaneously valorizing femininity while also neglecting gendered differences highlights tensions and ambiguities that gendered ideologies play in farm life. In defining femininity in specifically farm-based ways these women still maintain, contradictorily, that women are equal and therefore indistinct from men. This was also true for most of the young agricultural students.

The construction of gendered identities appeared virtually invisible to the women in their first responses to my questions. Upon further probing, a few of my interlocutors became more introspective about it:

I think that there are qualities that women have more than men. When you are a woman and you do this job, you can’t do anything on your own. You have to ask for help. I think a woman asks sooner for help than a man. Male farmers always think that they can do everything on their own. We have to ask for help, you can’t do everything on your own. Things are too heavy or animals are too big.

Iris proved Kim’s candid view about women’s physical limits when she hurt her back while lifting crops during the summer months. Naturally, men are not exempt from injury while laboring on the farm. Kim and Iris note the advantage of being a woman in such a situation because they have no shame in asking for help and, in turn, other farmers enjoy giving assistance. Men might feel that their asking for help runs against acceptable cultural or social norms for farm men. Iris elaborates:

From a man you can ask for help more easily. For a man, he usually wants to help a woman. If I was another man then he would say, ‘just help yourself, you’re a man.’ That’s just what I think. When we say, ‘can you help me with a machine?’ then a lot of people would help us and explain everything to us. But, another group of men just won’t take us seriously.

On the other hand, despite Iris’ injury, it seems she did not ask for help as soon as needed. This instance illustrates the anthropological truism that what we say is not necessarily how we act. Although women might ask for help more readily in some instances, anyone can make the mistake of over-estimating their physical strength. The last part of Iris’ statement subtly points to Anouk’s experience with conservative farmers who feel that farming should remain in men’s hands. They position themselves as different enough to benefit from their perceived feminine traits yet sufficiently similar to male farmers to maintain a commonplace role in the their male-dominated farming community. In other words, female farmers appear to strive to balance their distinction with invisibility.
Gendered Spheres, and Farming

You know, that we are women is not really an issue for us. It’s just part of our identity.—Anne

As agriculture becomes more complex in the face of industrialization, female food producers’ tasks are multi-faceted and connected to the public realm. Their work does not exist in the vacuum of an isolated socio-economic sphere. For example, Anne would milk the cows in the morning and then work for her public relations firm, conducting interviews and writing articles, in the afternoon and evening. Other women harvest crops one moment and deliver them to customers in the next. These women do not isolate themselves on their farm, especially because cars allow the farmers to travel on their own schedules. As such, paradigms like public/private and nature/nurture do not necessarily divide along gender lines on the farm. Moreover, participation in nature is not mutually exclusive with participation in the public sphere and thus both paradigms should be addressed as a spectrum.

These women do not seem to see farming from a mechanical, industrial point of view. Therefore, one might say that they uphold a stereotype, supposedly being closer to nature as women and saying things like, “I just love animals and always wanted to be part of nature.” But, does their love for nature or animals truly relate to their gender? Furthermore, their potentially stereotypical role is complicated because they participate in nature as a way to be in the public sphere.5

In previous times, the limits imposed by the stark distinctions between public/private spheres in farming encouraged women to dedicate their time and labor to the domestic sphere. Sherry Ortner’s (1974) seminal work argues that women are closer to nature whereas men are closer to culture and explores the inherent hierarchy of such a dichotomy. She explains that:

The distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes. Thus culture (i.e. every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform--to “socialize” and “culturalize”--nature (1974: 73).

Ornter’s distinctions are helpful in understanding that although there is currently a merging of home labor and agricultural labor in farming, there remains a clear distinction in gender-based tasks.

For many of my interlocutors, childcare led to shifting gendered roles on the farm. Among the women, reproduction perpetuates dichotomous gendered roles on the farm as women transition from more technical farm work, based in the farm, like milking cows and tilling the land to inter-personal work, based in the house, like publicity and direct communication with customers. In this regard, Kim puts her aspirations second to her brothers' when she expresses that should her brothers want to take over her parent’s farm, they should have priority:

Because, I know that I can’t do it on my own when you’re a woman. Sometimes, people say, ‘a woman can also do that’ but you see when you’ve got children then you can’t do it on your own.

5 I would have a more nuanced answer here had I also did research on men, thus revealing a limitation of single gendered research.
While it might be possible to find counter-examples to Kim’s assertion, she is right in terms of her own experience as well as that of Stephanie’s. When she and Stephanie each became mothers, their roles and tasks on the farm changed dramatically. Stephanie said:

There were many things that I was doing. I was up at four to milk [the cows] in the morning. I made the cheese. I put the shit away. I did all that! That is why I didn’t mind doing less. When my daughter was sick, nothing else interested me.

If a child had to be taken care of, it was the mother who sacrificed her work on the farm. When Kim had her first child, she and her husband took turns working on the farm. Now that she is pregnant again, her physical exhaustion leaves her tied more closely to the home. Fisher explains that:

on the farm, the line between reproductive and productive work is intrinsically blurred; there is no clear definition of what separates farm work from domestic labor. A woman’s role on the farm often combined both productive and reproductive labor. The valued and recognized cooperation between these two types of labor was rare (Fisher 2010: 10).

In essence, reproduction limits women’s time and physical capabilities with regard to “productive” labor, which can lead to women’s domestication (Nightingale 2006: 171). Such domestication did not happen so drastically in the circumstances of the women with whom I met. Replacing productive labor with domestic labor was not necessarily the “natural” course for the women on the farm but, for those who did have children, like Stephanie, she preferred to work less with the cows and more with the customers. The subsequent distinct gender roles that Stephanie and her husband have do not necessitate a power structure because the farm, as a business, requires inter-personal work as much as technical work.

Stephanie and Kim act as mother – cooking and taking care of the home – while they also milk the cows or make the cheese. They are not stuck in one sphere or the other, but balance between the two (Bock 2001: 80). Through time, both the men and women on the farms I visited are changing their roles to be more independent entrepreneurs. More recent feminist political ecology research like the work of Nightingale (2006) complicates women’s essentialist connection to the agricultural land by addressing the necessity of looking at “political-economic, cultural, and symbolic processes by which gender is produced by environmental issues. ...In short, what is still not sufficiently highlighted is a clear understanding of how gender has come to be relevant in these contexts at all” (169). Taking up this absence in scholarship, I found, as noted earlier, the women in my research often denied seeing their gender as playing a significant part in their life experiences on the farm. However, the women’s identification of gendered labor became more apparent and concrete when they were able to speak in terms of a specific topic (i.e. reproduction or technology). In other words, their connection to one sphere or another was indistinct because it shifted depending upon the lens in which one analyzes their role.

While the above examples addressed motherhood, gendered spheres are also complicated by sexuality. When Anouk decided to live with Anne and start a farm together, Anouk’s isolation from her community was not necessarily because she resisted normative gender roles by starting a farm but more because her sexuality added a further layer of challenge. Thus, the intersection of gender and sexuality has a role in how one experiences work as a farmer. Anne and Anouk’s relationship epitomizes that other factors complicate a strict binary for two reasons. Firstly, Anne has an external job and makes the main income outside of the house. Secondly, Anouk, as the woman, is “the boss” of the farm yet does not go into
“public” life as much as Anne, since her job is at home. Does this make Anouk a player in the “private” world? Michelle Rosaldo proposed that if women do not enter the men’s world, then they should create a public world of their own (1974: 35). Perhaps, this is a reason for women to start their own farms in a time when female subordination in the agriculture field still exists.

Technology also influences gendered spheres in agriculture through its symbolic connection to culture and thus masculinity. A shift in farming techniques toward a greater reliance on technology and innovation might be “a process that becomes significant in contingent and specific ways with variable and unpredictable ecological outcomes [such that] gender relations need to be analyzed as both a fundamental cause and a consequence of environmental issues” (Nightingale 2006: 170). Nightingale’s point illuminates a catch-22 in which gendered labor roles stem from and rely on ecological and technological circumstances. This cycle may lead to women experiencing alienation that might manifest in the socialized gender norms that my interviewees experience.

When talking to these six women, all alluded to their closeness to nature or their animals as reasons for loving their job. Other researchers have noted the alignment of industrial farming with gender dichotomies. For example, Storm-van der Chijs notes that “a transfer of dairying from the farm to the factory implied a shift to the other gender’s domain” (van der Burg 1994: 128). Given this, when the raw product becomes processed by technological innovation and industry, women often become more detached from the agricultural product. In this study, the sample of women, all of whom owned small-scale farms, seemed to indicate a lack of desire to connect with large-scale industry, perhaps because of a perceived alienation. For these six women, nature, the plants or animals, seemed to be the main impetus for farming. Men tend to be associated with industry to the extent that women might be actively pushed away from large-scale agriculture, as farmers invest more in the technological processing of natural products. Rosaldo explains women’s place in the sphere of nature as “an ascribed status; a woman is seen as ‘naturally’ what she is” (1974: 28). Therefore, a woman’s ostensibly intrinsic detachment from culture manifests in Anne’s defensive reaction to my suggesting that her farm was industrialized:

I think our dairy farm is not an industry. This is a family farm. And, all animals have a name. This is very different from industry. But, the sound of industry...it doesn’t feel like that. Not for us. It’s a craftsmanship, that’s important. I think that if you produce food and you use animals for that--chickens, pigs, cows--you should start at the bottom. What does a chicken, cow or pig need have a really nice life? Start there. Make sure the animal gets everything he needs and then make the cost price.

Anne shows us that the natural condition of her farm and the animals is most important. Anne and Anouk do not see their femininity as informing their focus on the natural. Thus, these women’s self-identifications with nature might give their roles as farmers normalcy, empower them by carving out a niche sphere or, conversely, disable them by limiting their ability to transcend different spheres on the farm.

The women value farming as a craftsmanship, which is becoming obsolete in the face of industry. In capitalist societies, such craftsmanship in agricultural production seems neither sustainable nor economical when consumers see little more than the price tag of the farmers’ products. The resulting modern production techniques are, in general, easier and more straight-
forward than craftsmanship processes but tend to alienate farmers from their products, as we see in gendered ways. Even though her work might be rooted in industrial production techniques, Anne’s focus on craftsmanship strives to resist industrialization.

Tjarda, however, emphasizes her connection to nature when she explains that she loves working with her hands. Like Iris, she does not look at the economic or cultural benefit until the end. Tjarda’s favorite part of farming, for instance, was harvesting potatoes: working with your hands, she says is “like digging for gold.” Similarly, Stephanie greatly valorizes here holistic cheese-farming practice:

You milk yourself. You have the milk and then you make the product. You do the whole cycle yourself. In this time, in this society, there are such few things that you can do from the beginning to the end yourself. From the start to the selling to the people who eat your product. That’s the special thing for me.

Anouk and Anne cringed when I tried to speak with them about industrial dairy farming. They refused to consider their farm part of an industry simply because they did not have biological certifications nor use particularly ecological practices.8

Anne: We definitely come at it from a very different perspective. Working with the animals, for us, is the first issue in agriculture. Not especially making food. That’s not the main reason why we do this.

Anouk: No, but you’re aware that you’re in the food business so we have to clean and give medication and stuff like that. So, we would never do pigs or poultry because cows... I don’t know.

As Anouk finished this last statement, she seemed at a loss for words and then just smiled broadly at the thought of her forty cows just meters away. While Anne’s most challenging part of farming is the time commitment, for Anouk, the animals are both the challenge and the reward. The difficulties lie in breeding her own cows and, even more testing, “to breed a cow that is going to be a champion of Holland.” Toward the end of my visit, Anne looks me in the eyes and says:

We are very proud to have fulfilled a dream. We said to each other that when you are 80 or 90 years old and you’re in a retirement house, you have to look back on your life and think, ‘okay, I haven’t done everything right but at least I’ve done what I wanted to do. Tried it!’

These women wake up every morning to milk the cows or tend to their crops. Neither the cows nor the crops have holidays, so many of these farmers do not either. As a “way of life,” these farmers dedicate almost 365 days per year to their profession. To reiterate Anouk and Anne’s point: farming must be in your blood. These women seem to find meaning by resisting mainstream life through their participation in a male-dominated profession.

This small group of female farmers illustrates a complex relationship with such dichotomies as public/private spheres and nature/culture identities. To apply these dichotomies specifically to the agriculture sphere: males are to industry as females are to the farm. Ortner reminds us: “the culture/nature distinction is itself a product of culture, culture being minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of systems of thought and technology of the natural

8 To their credit, the only noticeable technology on their farm was the milking machines, albeit there certainly was a tractor.
givens of existence” (1974: 84). The mere origin of this distinction creates a power structure in and of itself. Despite my interlocutors sometimes finding themselves in more domestic roles, which scholars deem subordinate, my research reveals that the women themselves do not feel subordinate or undervalued.

Concluding Reflections

The six women I interviewed are all in very different positions vis-à-vis their gendered and agricultural identities. In some cases, the women surprised themselves in their reactions and responses. Our discussions allowed them to express themselves in a thoughtful way that served for both my research and their own insight. Each woman told me that she was not the “typical woman farmer,” as if to warn me against extrapolating from her experiences. This highlights ambiguities and unresolvedness concerning the identities of modern female farmers. Perhaps, an increase in women’s agency on the farm gives rise to the obsolescence of a formulaic lifestyle for women who own farms.

Unlike the female farmers who tend to stay on their own land and rarely interact with other farmers, regardless of gender, I was able to move within these different circles to connect their shared positions. Looking at the greater food system, my main aim was to more closely connect producers and consumers and, after experiencing the minimal connection that women farmers have with one another, to connect these producers with one another even simply on an emotional level. Most of the women’s rejection of industrialization contributes to eco-feminist discussions as a way of playing out a normative femininity, which might be better expressed by their natural farming techniques, their work ethic, and their role in the domestic sphere. Further research might be pursued focusing on how women’s experiences play out in a larger setting because it should not be presumed that each woman exists in a microcosm.

The female farmers I have written about spent hours walking me through their farms, cooking food for me, and playing chess with me. All of these activities helped me to understand
these women in a more intimate way. Their initial struggle to distinguish themselves from men on the farm highlights their introspective learning as our discussions progressed.

My field research allowed me to be seen less as a researcher and more as their student and admirer. Stereotypical views about farmers’ identities range from the “bourgeois middle classes [and] their so-called lack of refinement [as] connected to being not civilized, rough, backward and traditional. In contrast, romanticists describe the same persons as balanced, honest, industrious and reliable” (van der Berg, 1994: 126). I experienced the latter when talking with these motivated women. As my relationship deepened with the farmers, I was able to better understand the personal relationship that the women have with their work. Each of the six women talked with me about and showed me how she lives each day with innate passion and commitment to nurture and sustain her farm.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank my mentors and friends in Amsterdam at the School of International Training, Anke de Vrieze, Francesca Miazzo and the Brandeis University Anthropology Department for their continued guidance and support. I am grateful to Jessica Hardin, Laura Thompson, and three anonymous peer reviewers for extremely useful comments on earlier drafts. Finally, I would like to thank the women farmers who welcomed me to their homes and their farms, fed me, and answered my seemingly endless questions. Your openness, warmth, and encouragement allowed me to fully invest in this research.

Author Biography: Marisa Turesky will graduate from Brandeis University in May, 2013 with a BA in Cultural Anthropology and Women’s and Gender Studies. She is currently researching how women farmers in the Netherlands interact with technology. Marisa serves on the Alumni Board for Young People For, facilitating leadership trainings and mentoring college activists across the country.
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