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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE



Farming, Gender and Aspirations Across Young People's Life Course: Attempting to Keep Things Open While Becoming a Farmer

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Abstract

Drawing on life history interviews conducted in Indian and Indonesian study sites, we tease out the social production of aspirations in the process of becoming a farmer. We show the power of a doxic logic in which schooling is regarded as *the* pathway out of farming, towards a future of non-manual, salaried employment. Among rural youth this doxic logic produces broadly defined aspiration such as 'completing education', and 'getting a job'. In the absence of clear pathways to realise such aspirations, young people seek to keep options open. Yet, the scope for doing so changes in relation to key life events such as ending school, migration and marriage and does so in distinctly gendered ways. We conclude proposing that young people's delayed entrance into farming, among other things, must be understood as an attempt to keep open those futures that are considered closed by an early entry into full-time farming.

Keywords Youth · Gender · Farming · Life course · Aspiration

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Résumé

En nous appuyant sur des récits de vie, collectés grâce à des entretiens menés dans des sites d'étude en Inde et en Indonésie, nous déterminons la production sociale des aspirations chez les agriculteurs en devenir. Nous démontrons la puissance de la logique doxastique selon laquelle la scolarisation est considérée comme une porte de sortie de l'agriculture, vers un avenir d'emploi salarié non manuel. Chez les jeunes ruraux, cette norme produit des aspirations assez larges telles que «terminer ses études» et «trouver un emploi». En l'absence de voies claires pour réaliser ces aspirations, les jeunes cherchent à garder ouvert le champ des possibles. Pourtant, la possibilité de conserver cette ouverture évolue en fonction des événements importants de la vie tels que la fin de l'école, la migration et le mariage et cela se passe de façon bien distincte selon le sexe. Nous concluons en proposant l'hypothèse que l'entrée tardive des jeunes dans l'activité agricole, entre autres, doit être considérée comme une tentative de garder ouvert ce champ des possibles, que fermerait une entrée précoce dans l'agriculture à plein temps.

Introduction

The debate about the 'generation problem' in farming (Rigg et al. 2019; White 2020) constitutes a fertile context for thinking about aspirations. Youth's aspirations, or the lack thereof, underpin diverse explanations of an ageing farmers population, a trend observed in many countries (but note Yeboah and Jayne 2018, pp. 817–818). Some argue that this trend reflects a lack of interest among the young in farming futures (Tadele and Gella 2012). Others place more emphasis on structural factors frustrating young people's potential pathways into farming (Li 2017).

Theorists have insisted that aspirations are socially produced. According to Arjun Appadurai (2004, p. 67) aspirations 'are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life'. Yet, it is less clear what, precisely, this 'thick of social life' constitutes for rural youth, how this transforms in relation to key events in young people's life such as schooling, leaving school, migration or getting married, its effects on the formation of aspirations and the role of farming therein. In this article we analyse life history interviews conducted with rural youth and adults at different points in the process of becoming a farmer. This sheds light on the interplay between life course dynamics and aspiring (not) to become a farmer. In doing so, we recognise the intersectional condition of youth (Huijsmans 2016b). This means that young people are never just young; youth is gendered, young people are located in a class structure, may belong to a caste, and religious identities may matter too. We may thus expect aspirations and the scope for realising these to differ significantly between a young woman from a landed family and a young man from a landless family even if they come from the same village and have attended the same schools.

The process of becoming a farmer is particularly interesting for studying the role of aspirations. First, becoming a farmer is often a long-drawn, gradual process. This provides much scope to study how farming aspirations might emerge, transform, or disappear in relation to other events in young people's life course. Monllor's research (2012, pp. 10–11) in Canada and Spain indicates that it typically takes more than a



decade to become established as 'career' farmer.¹ At that point, farmers make all farm decisions themselves and consider themselves settled and well positioned in farming. 'Established' also means that farmers possess 'sufficient experience and enough commitment and security to advise other young entrants in earlier phases of the pathway' (ibid 2012, p. 11). Second, unlike trajectories into other occupations children and youth growing up in rural areas often get involved in farm work from an early age. For example when they work on their parents' fields, get involved in exchange labour on other people's fields, work for pay in agriculture, or when they grow and sell their own crops (Reynolds 1991; Li 2014, p. 59; Huijsmans 2019).² The life history approach allows teasing out the role of childhood farm work experiences in the formation of aspirations. Third, the discursive environment makes smallholder farming an unlikely aspiration in many contexts. School textbooks orient children away from farming by underrepresenting and at times devaluing rural life and farming (Ansell et al. 2018). Small-holder farming is often also seen as a denigrated occupation 'associated with the poor and uneducated rural communities' (Mwaura 2017, p. 1331) and 'ascribed a low status in the caste-based division of labour' (Vijayabaskar et al. 2018). In such a discursive context, how, why and when have some young people become a farmer? And what is the role of aspirations in this? These are not just important questions for theorising aspirations, but also bear policy relevance in relation to the future of farming (Leavy and Smith 2010; Okali and Sumberg 2012).

The next section presents a brief context to the research and explains the methodology used. This is followed by a discussion of key tools in theorising the social production of aspiration in relation to life course dynamics; most notably Bourdieu inspired approaches and the work of Johnson-Hanks (2002, 2005). The analysis of the empirical material is structured around key events in young people's life, including childhood memories of farming, the role of schooling and ending school, and migration and marriage. Throughout we attend to gender and class in shaping the social production of aspiration and young people's differential opportunities to pursue these. In the concluding section we offer additional explanations for young people's often delayed entry into farming and the pluriactive form such farming often takes.

¹ We use the phrase 'career farmer' following Okali and Sumberg (2012) to differentiate from those who enter farming in order to earn 'quick money' possibly with the aim of leaving agriculture.

² We have not studied so-called newcomer farmers (Monllor, 2012). These are people who enter into farming without a farming background (e.g. many urban farmers). In Indonesia and India this phenomenon is largely limited to (peri)urban areas.



Methodology and Context

The material presented in this article comes from a research project entitled ‘Becoming a Young Farmer’.³ The project spans four countries (Canada, China, India, and Indonesia), but in this article we limit the analysis to material from the Indian and Indonesian sites. India and Indonesia are two large Asian countries with fast growing economies and rapidly transforming societies.⁴ Nonetheless, agriculture is still the single biggest source of employment including for young people who constitute a large share of the respective populations. The comparative, qualitative approach adopted in this article seeks to stimulate thinking about the differences and similarities in how aspirations are socially produced in relation to different groups of rural youth across and within these two countries, without however claiming to be representative for either of these countries. Our comparative approach seeks to overcome the national frame that often delimits social science analyses (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). While we acknowledge the role of national level factors (e.g. state-schooling, national law with regards to inheritance) in shaping young people’s aspirations, the comparative approach allows flagging the interplay with more localised as well as globalised dynamics.

Our empirical focus is on smallholder farming. This is the most common form of farming in both India and Indonesia. According to Indonesian Inter-Census Agricultural Survey, there are 27 million ‘land holder agricultural households’ in Indonesia and 58% of these were so-called *gurem* households (farming less than 0.5 hectare) (BPS 2018). India presents a similar landscape with marginal (less than 1 ha) and small landholdings (1–2 ha) comprising 85% of all operational landholdings (NABARD 2014). In both India and Indonesia, smallholder farming has been confronted with various intersecting crises such as declining terms of trade, fragmented landholdings, rising land prices, and environmental crises (Vijayabaskar et al. 2018).

The Indian data were collected in 2017–2018 by a research team comprising Indian researchers (including the fourth author) in the southern-most state of Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu, agriculture constitutes a relatively small part of the state’s GDP and its human development indicators are among India’s highest (Kalaiyaran 2014). The research was conducted in the western region of Tamil Nadu, known for a dynamic farming economy and an even more vibrant non-farm economy dominated by textiles and garment production, agricultural and textile machinery, auto component production and agro-processing to a lesser extent. The region has a well-developed road and transport networks facilitating intense rural–urban circulations of labour. All respondents quoted in this article belong to the Kongu Vellala caste, which predominates farming in the region. Agriculture consists mostly of coconut cultivation, horticulture, sugarcane, turmeric, maize and several tree crops. The

³ This is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada), Insight Grant funded study (PI: Dr Sharada Srinivasan, University of Guelph). Further, we use the phrase ‘young farmer’ to differentiate from those who return to rural areas and enter farming as a retirement occupation (e.g. Mabiza 2013).

⁴ This also holds for China, but the different way in which land relations are structured in the Chinese context means we have left it out of the analysis.



region is also home to an emerging organic farming community. The current generation of youth appears to lack an interest in farming as a future livelihood. Survey research investigating Tamil Nadu's young people's future job aspirations found that no youth aspired to become a farmer (Vijayabaskar 2014).

The Indonesian part of the study was conducted by a team of Indonesian researchers (including the second and third author) in 2017 in three villages in Jogjakarta and Central Java on Java Island and in two villages in West Manggarai Regency (WMR), East Nusa Tenggara, Flores Island. The Jogjakarta and Central Java villages are characterised by irrigated rice cultivation and is home to a large proportion of landless farm workers. There is also some vegetable and fruit farming. In WMR, upland farming is more common, which some farmers combine with irrigated rice cultivation. Further, city-bound migration is relatively easy for young people from rural Central Java and Jogjakarta, whereas for those from WMR this often means leaving the island of Flores (typically to the city of Makassar, South Sulawesi).

Qualitative interviews inspired by the life history method were conducted with rural youth and adults between 18 and 45 years of age. This way we have captured perspectives from various stages in the process of becoming a farmer, ranging from rural youth considering and exploring farm-based livelihoods to fully established farmers (Monllor 2012, p. 10). In these interviews we focused on key moments in the life course (such as memories of schooling, leaving school, marriage, migration) as well as key moments in the process of becoming a farmer (such as first memory of helping parents farm, growing one's own crop, access to one's own piece of land, etc.). A life history interview allows us to understand how life course dynamics intersect with the process of becoming a young farmer, how such moments were experienced, and were formative of, or frustrating certain aspirations. We have treated the life history material as socially situated, shaped by particular histories, politico-economic realities and shaped by the intersection of relations of gender, class, ethnicity and age.

Life history material also poses some challenges for understanding the social production of aspirations. Most importantly, life histories are recollections from the past told from the vantage point of the present. If we take the position that children and youth perceive and experience the world differently from adults because of differences in psychological and cognitive development and because of their particular position in the generational order (Huijsmans 2016a), we must recognise the material presented as essentially (young) adults' childhood and youth memories. This has to be distinguished from *actual* experiences and perceptions of children and youth. To overcome this dilemma we have also included some material from research with children and youth.

The Indian and Indonesian research teams consisted of highly educated, urban-based researchers. They thus embodied the doxic discourse which views education as a key ingredient to social mobility and in which white collar jobs are valued more highly than manual labour such as farming. We have been mindful of this positionality. By spending time (e.g. in the case of WMR several weeks) and building rapport with our respondents we hope that we have succeeded in reducing the effects of our positionality on the data generated.



The cases presented in this article are selected because they represent some main patterns of young people's pathways into farming and the role of aspirations therein. For the Indian material this is based on interviews with 54 respondents (11 women). 50 Respondents were identified through snowball sampling in the target villages and an additional four respondents were recruited through the online networks of the organic farming community to ensure that this sector was also included. In the Indonesian sites, respondents were first identified through village officials, NGOs, and previous research conducted in the study villages as well as snowball sampling. This way a total of 109 respondents (60 men, 49 women) were identified and interviewed.

Care has been taken to capture important differences between young farmers in both India and Indonesia. As already noted, we interviewed respondents at different stages in the process of becoming a farmer. In addition, we interviewed land-owning farmers as well as sharecroppers and talked with both successful and less successful young farmers. In addition, given the paucity of research on women's entry into farming we interviewed women respondents where possible. This allowed us to theorise the gendered dimensions of the social production of aspirations. In addition, women farmer's voices are often excluded from the literature yet they typically shoulder a large share of the work.

Theorising Aspirations in Young People's Life Course: Bourdieu and Beyond

Contemporary theoretical work on aspirations draws strongly on Pierre Bourdieu's work, including the literature on youth and aspirations (e.g. Appadurai 2004; Zipin et al. 2015; DeJaeghere 2018; Stahl et al. 2019a). Bourdieu's concepts are useful for analysing how 'social structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 14, In: Stahl et al. 2019b, p. 3).

Drawing on Bourdieu, Zipin et al. (2015) propose a framework for theorising aspirations differentiating between doxic, habituated and emergent logics. Doxic logics refer to aspirations generated by unquestioned truths propagated through 'policy and populist ideologics' (Zipin et al. 2015, p. 228). Woronov (2016, p. 7) provides a powerful illustration of doxic logic in relation to the Chinese context in which there is a strong 'culturalist view' according to which 'loving to study is normal, and desiring the best possible marks in school is culturally expected'. Kaland (this issue) and Sier (this issue) illustrate that these doxic aspirations are rooted in Chinese middle-class realities but affect the less privileged equally. Because, these latter youth have fewer opportunities to realise such doxic aspirations this amounts to a form of violence '*which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*' (Bourdieu 1992, p. 167, In: Zipin et al. 2015, p. 231, original emphasis). Next to doxic aspirations, Zipin et al. also propose the idea of 'habituated aspirations'; aspirations 'based in the dispositional structure of habitus, [and] embody the possibilities-within-limits of given social-structural positions' (Zipin et al. 2015, p. 234). When young people rule out certain futures because these are considered 'not for the likes of us' we see habituated logics at play (Burke 2019, p. 25).



Jennifer Johnson-Hanks' contribution to theorising aspiration also draws on Bourdieu (Johnson-Hanks 2002, p. 871). Yet, unlike Bourdieu's work (e.g. Salgues 2018, pp. 118–119) hers *is* based on direct research with young people (educated young women in southern Cameroon). Her work is also relevant because it takes conditions of uncertainty seriously. This is highly relevant for understanding rural young lives in the Global South whose presents and futures are often greatly precarious (Berckmoes and White 2014). Johnson-Hanks (2005, p. 366) posits that in southern Cameroon the objective conditions of social life are greatly uncertain, in addition there is also 'substantial local ambivalence about the legitimacy, viability, and even morality of intentional action that seem so intuitive and self-evident to many scholars in the affluent West'. In such a context, she contends it makes little sense 'to develop a good plan and follow it but rather to respond effectively to the contingent, sudden, and surprising offers that life can make' (Johnson-Hanks 2005, p. 376). She calls this 'judicious opportunism' in which maintaining options, rather than acting in a planned fashion upon narrowly defined aspirations, is the central driver of action (Johnson-Hanks 2005, p. 370).

Orientations towards the future characterised by keeping things open are also central to Di Nunzio's (2019) *The Act of Living*. The men Di Nunzio conducted his ethnographic research with in Addis Ababa moved from one job to the next. Nonetheless, they 'did dream, but visions of a prefigured future of achieved aspirations were rarely imagined as actual plans to pursue. They were just dreams' (p. 15). For the urban poor of Addis Ababa, moving from one job to the next, indeed, was a pragmatic strategy to make ends meet. But more importantly, it was also a tactic to 'keep things open, and exposing themselves to the possibility of getting that chance' (Di Nunzio 2019, p. 17).

In contexts of development characterised by rapid and dramatic change, and uncertainty the theoretical work by Johnson-Hanks and Di Nunzio usefully complements more deterministic, and path-dependent approaches to theorising aspiration that stress habituated and doxic logics. In addition, a tactics of keeping things open connects with the notion of 'emergent aspirations' proposed by Zipin et al. (2015) and helps explaining the phenomenon of rural youth articulating very broadly defined (e.g. completing education, formal employment, building a house) and fluid sets of aspirations. As we proceed to argue, career farming must be recognised as a narrow aspiration and a point of closure to a range of alternative futures. In the next sections we tease out how young people navigate the tension between keeping futures open and the idea of career farming as closing off alternative futures.

Childhood Experiences of Farming: Developing Diverse Dispositions

Our respondents recalled their childhood experience of farming very differently, despite sharing a rural background. To a large extent this can be attributed to differences in class position. We also observed an overall difference between our Indonesian and Indian study sites: among our Indian respondents, early involvement in farm work was less common than in the Indonesian sites because the Indian marginal and smallholder farmers we interviewed preferred hiring labour



rather than putting their children to work. In addition, the landless households (including lowest caste households) that were part of our Indian sample tended to not involve their children when they worked on other people's land as day labourers. Hence, observations such as the one below were relatively rare in the Indian study sites:

Q: As a young boy, did you part-take in farm activities?

Subbu: Yes, I did. In fact, even today I milk the cows before going to work.

(Subbu, 33 year old man who is now farming part-time next to working in garment factories, Tamil Nadu, India).

Differences in class position go a long way in explaining variations in how young adults look back at similar kinds of farm-based work during childhood. Consider the memories of these two young men from Java:

When I was a child, the things that made me go to the rice fields were fear of my parents [who told him to go] and the harvesting party. At the harvesting party I could get a package of *wiwitan* rice and traditional ice cream. There's nothing else. Nothing to do with becoming a farmer. No! (Rudi, 41 year old sharecropper, Jogjakarta).

Sumar says he was about 9 years old when he first got involved in farming. It was his father who asked him to help out in the rice fields. Later on his father also asked him to plant peanuts and when he finished primary school he was the one responsible for cultivating grass to feed the cows. His parents gave him money for the work. This was part of the reason Sumar did not continue with higher education. He said, 'at that time, I already knew what money is. So, farming was better than continuing school' (Sumar, 28 year old farmer, Central Java).

Both men got involved in farm work at a young age because their parents asked them to. Sumar looked back at it in neutral terms and explained how the money he earned through farming influenced his later life choices. Rudi's account is more mixed. There were certainly things Rudi liked about farming (the harvesting party) but he was clear that the frequent hard (and unpaid) work of labouring the fields was not among this. A main factor that sets Rudi and Sumar apart is land ownership. Rudi's parents were sharecroppers, whereas Sumar's parents owned the land they worked. This difference in economic base explains why Sumar's parents were able to give him some money for his contribution. Consequently, Sumar and Rudi developed different dispositions towards farming during childhood. Rudi exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*; from a young age farming was a fact of life and he came to view this as his inevitable future occupation (but note the complexity we add below). Sumar, in contrast, was positively attracted towards farming because he had experienced it as a relatively easy way of making money.

For yet others, early childhood experiences of farming were characterised by even firmer class-based distinctions. Take the case of 39 year old Ina from Jogjakarta. Although her parents managed a farm, she insisted calling her parents



'civil servants' which, according to Ina, was their main job. Ina explained that her parents 'hired labour for every stage of the rice farming process' and never worked the fields themselves. Ina's class position shaped her childhood memories of growing up on a farm. She recalled that as a child she often went to the fields. Yet, never to work, 'but only to play'. When it came to agricultural work she said: 'all I remember is that I just waited for the grain to come from the fields and help my mother and sister to dry the grain in the yard'. At the time of interview, Ina was managing a fairly large farm and insisted 'I am an agricultural engineer, not a farmer like everyone else'.⁵ She was indeed a graduate from the Department of Agriculture in Jogjakarta. Yet, her childhood memories show that already from an early age she had been developing a class-based agrarian habitus different from most other people in her community.

Next to class, gender also emerged as a shaper of young people's dispositions towards farming. This became most clear in our sites in WMR, Indonesia, where custom prevents daughters from inheriting land. As a result, women depend entirely on their brothers, father or marriage for future access to farmland. Already at a young age, boys and girls are aware of how possible future pathways into farming are differentiated by gender:

My husband has already put the house certificate in the name of Fidel [her son and second born child]. Fidel understands this. Sometimes I see him joking to Rofina [his older sister] 'if you want to inherit land you must be nice with me'. Then Rofina will respond angrily and tell Fidel 'if not for me you cannot eat here'. I think this situation is a pity for Rofina [and laughs].
(Marni, 33 year old female farmer, WMR, Indonesia).

In addition to unequal inheritance custom, Rofina (12 years old) was also aware of the disproportionate share of the farm work that many women shouldered in our WMR study sites. She explained: 'the men here just *membajak* (do ploughing), it is women who do almost all the other work [in the fields and at home].' It was in part based on her awareness of the gendered division of labour that Rofina talked to us about her wish to leave WMR and become a police officer. However, Rofina also explained that realising this aspiration would be incompatible with her social obligation to support her mother as the oldest daughter. Rofina's case illustrates that habitus does not stop young people from dreaming, but it delimits the range of options young people feel confident in pursuing because it clashes with the other obligations that come with the particular social position they are growing up in.

⁵ In her research in Kenya with educated youth who have entered farming, Mwaura (2017, p. 1310) similarly reports the importance of performances through which these farmers distinguish themselves from 'stigmatized smallholder farmers' and maintain their status as 'elite, urbanized, social change makers'.



Schooling, Ending School and the Prospect of Farming

In contemporary theorisations of aspiration, schooling is often regarded as an institution central to the (re)production of ‘doxic aspirations’ (Zipin et al. 2015). Schut (2019, p. 87) claims that for rural Indonesians ‘an education is widely considered essential to succeed in life’. Brown et al. (2017, p. 534) concur on the basis of research with middle-class youth in India, they state that ‘education is a key modality through which Darjeeling youth forge their aspirations’. Yet, they also observed that ‘when Darjeeling youth complete their education they find few local opportunities for secure employment that are relevant to their qualifications’ (ibid 2017, p. 535). How does schooling work to produce such fairly similar sets of aspirations, particularly in rural, agrarian contexts in which realising them seems almost impossible?

Rudi, the sharecropper from Jogjakarta whom we introduced in the previous section, again makes for an insightful example. During childhood he initially dreamt about becoming a police officer or a (local) government official. Yet, coming from a poor background he knew this would be virtually impossible. It was for this reason that he started considering farming even though he did not really enjoy farm work as we have seen. When he articulated this ‘habituated aspiration’, in the discursive environment of the school he was met with ridicule, and later he also learnt that even this seemingly realistic aspiration was out of reach.

When my teacher asked about my future dream I answered that I wanted to become a farmer. All my classmates laughed. This made me cry even though the teacher tried to cheer me up by telling me that it is okay to become a successful farmer. After that I hated to become a farmer also because I realized that my father did not have his own rice fields.

Rudi’s words illustrate how the school as a social space works to direct young people away from farming futures. This is brought about by the urban bias of the curriculum (Ansell et al. 2018), the presence of the rural teacher as a figure of modernity (Morarji 2014) as well as through peer relations as the quote above suggests. In the case of Rudi, the power of the doxic logic in which schooling is associated with non-farming futures seems to have pushed more than a dent into the farming habitus that he had started to identify with.

Parents also played a role in maintaining the idea of schooling and farming as opposites. Especially in our Indian sites, we found that parents expressed concern if their children demonstrated a taste for or expertise in farming worrying that it might jeopardise the socially higher valued project of schooling and associated caste and class position. For example, this is what Selvi (34 year old woman farmer, Tamil Nadu) had to say about her 14 year old son’s involvement in farm work:

He takes care of the cows and is very friendly with the farm animals. He is also there during the sowing and harvesting. He is active in farming, but I don’t allow that at the cost of his studies. He is a better farmer than his father. I am not sure if he is doing it out of his interest or just for the sake of it. But, he keeps doing it.



Further, the remarks about the childhood experience of farming from 40 year old Chithra (works with her husband and in-laws on her husband's farm, Tamil Nadu) suggests that parenting practices discouraging children from involvement in farming are gendered:

I fondly remember pulling out weeds with my two brothers from the fields when I was young. I was interested in farming but my parents didn't let me put my feet on the soil. I lived like a queen.

The doxic logic in which schooling is prioritised over farm work becomes stronger the further young people have progressed on the educational pathway. This is not just a social fact bearing on young lives, it is also a logic some male youth in our Indonesian sites actively mobilised in order to trump their parents' claim on their labour:

My first farming experience was in third grade [primary school]. I pulled grass [*matun*] and helped transplanting rice. I did so because my father told me... When we got bigger and busier with school we started to avoid farm work. (Mardi, 26 year old male farmer, Central Java, Indonesia).

The story for girls was different. As mentioned above, in the Tamil Nadu sites parents rarely let their daughter do farm work even if they showed an interest, whereas the opposite was true in our Indonesian sites. For example, as an eldest daughter, Rofina (12 years old, WMR) shouldered a good part of the housework, she fed the pigs and watered the shallots in addition to full-time schooling. In contrast, her ten year old brother was allowed to play with friends after school and was not expected to do much (re)productive work. It is for this reason that Rofina told us 'I want to go to school in the dorms'. Studying away from the village and staying in a dorm was not only key to realising her future aspiration of becoming a police officer, but also to achieve her present aspiration of being a school-going teenaged girl which, in her view, was difficult to enact with dirty nails from farm work. Yet, unlike Mardi whom we quoted above, the only chance Rofina, as a girl, saw for reducing her participation in unpaid farm work was by physically removing herself from the village.

The power of the doxic logic in which education is associated with salaried, non-agricultural jobs (Schut 2019) is also confirmed by a counter-factual. When we interviewed Palani, he was 34 years old and working as an organic farmer in Tamil Nadu. Recollecting his pathway into farming, he explained that he had failed 12th grade and therefore did not make it into college. He acquired farming skills from fellow farmers who often were less educated than him. He insisted that it was because he had *not* completed his studies he was able to do so: 'Had I studied further...I would have been unwilling to accept another point of view, thinking I know better.' Becoming an organic farmer differed from the pathways conventional farmers had followed. After failing for 12th grade he first worked in a rice mill and then entered money lending ('collection business'). He was unhappy with these non-farming jobs, and had developed health problems from working in the mill. Yet the final trigger to enter organic farming was watching DVDs by a healer called Baskar.



He said: ‘I understood everything in that [DVDs] and wanted to get into [organic] agriculture’.

Young women farmers who had to quit school prematurely typically moved into farming much quicker:

My husband and I both studied up to 10th standard. I was so passionate about studying further. I was a very bright student. My fate [was that I] did not have scholarship, it looks like. I used to cry for several days asking that I should be allowed to go to school. But, my father wouldn’t allow me. There was no one to go from there to the school with me. Actually, I had to change two buses to get to the school. So, it was not safe for me...Even if I had to go to only 10th grade, I had to walk 4 kms. I begged my parents, but then, slowly, I also let it go. It was not their fault, you know! Those days were like that. It was not important for anyone. My brother tried to drag on for another 2 years. But, after my father passed away, he had to get back to farming. I was always crying. So, whenever I would go rearing cows and doing farming, if I found any paper, I would read it. My father did feel sad about it and got me lots of books, but then he couldn’t help me in getting to school. (Selvi, 34 year old female farmer, Tamil Nadu, India).

When we interviewed Selvi she was farming the four acres of land inherited from her father-in-law. Her husband farmed too, but did so only on a part-time basis next to his main job in a local grocery store. Selvi was convinced she would not have been farming had she been able to pursue a degree. She insisted that ‘even if I had studied until 12th, I would have gone to work outside the village.’

Selvi’s case confirms the doxic logic in which education is seen as leading to ‘work outside the village’ (i.e. non-farm work). However, Selvi’s case also tells another story: the struggle to stay in education and to continue educating herself as a way to keep options open (Johnson-Hanks 2005; Di Nunzio 2019). She might not have had a neatly defined aspiration had she been able to complete her studies (‘work outside the village’), yet she was well aware that leaving school early would very quickly reduce her options and that becoming a farmer would largely seal her fate. Also here, gender emerges as an important relation of differentiation. After all, Selvi’s brother managed to stay on in school for another two years. Similarly, for her husband a farming livelihood did *not* close other options as he entered farming on a part-time basis next to his main job in a local grocery store.

Migration and Marriage: Keeping Options Open and Closing Them Off

Marriage and migration featured in many of the life history interviews we conducted, at times in relation to one another and with important connections to the process of becoming a farmer. Among the young men we interviewed migration and marriage were often presented as aspirations in their own right. Among the young women in the South Indian and WMR sites, migration featured much less frequently in their life histories. In addition, marriage may have been an aspiration at some



point, yet when young women reflected upon it retrospectively it was discussed rather matter-of-factly not least because for young women marrying into a farming family often made it more difficult to realise other occupational aspirations (but compare with Newman 2020).

Many of the young people we interviewed spoke of the importance of migration at a young age. For some, migration was an important part of being young, whereas for others migration was instrumental for pursuing aspired adult futures. In relation to the former, for many of the young men we interviewed in our Indonesian sites migration was regarded as important to establish themselves as successful youth in the present. For example, 41 year old sharecropper Rudi (Jogjakarta) lamented about the time when he was young: 'If you had only stayed in the village and you never had been to Jakarta that was not cool!' Aspiring to such a youth identity led Rudi to leave for factory work in Tangerang (near Jakarta) at the age of 15 after he had graduated from junior high school.

In such a context, fully resorting to farming at too young an age conflicts with aspired forms of youth masculinity. This was also evident in the case of Mardi (Central Java). He left his village for factory work in the city of Bandung at the age of 15. After about a year in Bandung, his mother rang him and asked him to return home to help out on the farm because his parents were in poor health. Mardi recalled: 'I told my mother, please ask my older brothers because they have been away for longer than me. I am still young, I am still looking for experience.' Some years after Mardi had returned to the village his parents died and at the age of 19 he was farming his parents' rice fields (over 1500 m²) independently as one of the youngest farmers in the village. His longing for migration in relation to an aspired idea of being young, however, had not faded: 'Someday I want to leave the village. I am still young, I still want to find a new atmosphere and experience'. This indicates that Mardi is still far from 'established' as a farmer according to Monllor's (2012) terminology and he expresses only a limited commitment to career farming.

For other young men, migration during the youth phase was important for realising aspired forms of adulthood. This was particularly noticeable in the Indian context in which various respondents stressed the importance of spending time away from the village in order to increase one's marriage options. Kalai, wife of Subbu, put this most clearly when she explained: 'Generally, people [young men] in the village go to work outside the village only for the purpose of getting married. It is difficult to get married if you are a farmer.'

Across these diverse reasons for youth migration, migration functioned as a means to keeping options open that would be delimited or perhaps even be closed off had these young people stayed in the village and fully committed to farming. Unsurprisingly, in both the Indian and the WMR context gender norms meant that young men had greater scope to pursue migrations than young women. However, the case of Mardi underscores that there are also variations between young men in their ability to pursue migration (and postpone entry into farming), for example, because of differences in birth order.

Where migration appeared playing a role in keeping options open, the reverse was true for marriage – at least for young women (see also: Newman 2020, p. 13). For young men from landed households, marriage, or at times parenthood, often led



to an intergenerational transfer of resources. For example, Rafi (35 years old, Central Java) remembers that it was soon after his marriage that his father ‘gave’ him land (490 square metre). Although the land was yet to be formally transferred, from that moment he could keep the yields himself. It is for this reason that he claimed that since marriage he has been taking farming more seriously. While one could say that Rafi, thus, had become a farmer he himself disagreed with this conclusion: ‘I feel I am half farmer and half a trader, because If I say I am a totally a farmer, my land is so small. But I am also only trading for two years, this is still learning phase’.

Rafi’s case is illustrative of what we found among many young farmers in both India and Indonesia. Their land holdings were often too small to rely fully on farming, there were problems with inputs, or the profits from farming were too small to sustain their young families. In the Indian context, Selvi echoed the same concerns: ‘If agriculture was remunerative, there was absolutely no need for him [her husband] to go out. If the family is together in agriculture, works together, there is no better occupation than agriculture. The problem really is with capital and water.’ Without denying that the many difficulties smallholder farmers are confronted with contribute to pluriactive rural livelihoods, as the cases of Rafi and Selvi illustrate, the question remains how this plays out at the level of the household and how it relates to the quest of keeping things open. In the case of Rafi, both he and his wife were involved in farming and non-farm activities. However, in such scenarios it was more common to see women shoulder the lion’s share of the farm work. In our Indian sites we observed a sharper gendered division of labour. Even if young women worked hard on keeping options open while being fully assigned to farming after marriage, few succeeded in keeping this up and most would eventually succumb to a career of farming as the case of Selvi illustrates:

After I got married, I forgot all about it. Then, I had to convince myself saying farming is the thing I am probably destined to do. I wanted to actually stand on my own feet. So, I went for training. I learned some basic tailoring for three months and would do some stitching. I earned some small money, enough for me to handle my expenses. But, at home, people did tell me not to go and asked me to help out in farming. Then, I stopped.

The life history interviews with young women whom following their studies worked in one of the garment factories located at close proximity to our Indian study site reflected a similar logic. In these narratives, factory work was presented as a temporary postponement of a farming career. Eswari reflects on this as follows: ‘I always knew I would have to do some kind of agriculture work. That’s what was expected of all of us. Women go to company or garment jobs, but eventually, they all have to do farm chores.’ She claimed that she does not differentiate between farm work and factory work – both were equal to her. Yet, many other young women compared factory work favourably to their current farm work. Work in Tamil Nadu’s garment factories might be tough, repetitive and poorly paid (Srinivasan 2016); yet, it also amounted to postponing early entry into farming and thereby keeping alternative futures open. While men typically managed to combine farm responsibilities with other activities this was much less the case for women. Especially in our Indian context, entering farming after marriage meant a definite closure of various future options. One young



woman farmer in the Indian study site expressed this point in an embodied manner by referring to the colour of her skin (see also High 2004). Through a casual remark she powerfully suggested that marriage had been the point of closure of potential alternative futures. Upon marriage she had entered farming full-time and she saw the effects of this literally marked on her body: 'you should see my photo at the time of my wedding. I used to be so fair'.

Becoming a Career Farmer at Too Young an Age as Closing Off Options

At the outset of this article we observed that explanations for an increasing average age of farmers, which is observed in various countries, tend to come in two versions. Survey research among youth indicate that young people have little interest in becoming a career farmer (White, this issue). For some, this means that farming has to be made more attractive for youth, and digital technologies are often seen as the solution (FAO 2014, p. 3; Irungu et al. 2015; IFAD 2019, Chap. 8). Others have cautioned that underpinning this apparent lack of aspirations for becoming a farmer are structural dynamics that have made it difficult for young people to establish themselves as farmers, including rising land prices, volatile markets, large-scale land concessions, environmental crises, and older farmers needing to stay in farming ever longer (White 2020). Evidently, none of these issues are resolved by making farming more attractive.

The research we have presented in this article does not deny the role of structural factors. Yet, we argue that this does not render youth's aspirations irrelevant. We have made this argument by combining Bourdieu inspired approaches to theorising aspirations that illuminate how 'social structures and cognitive structures are recursively and structurally linked' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 14, In: Stahl et al. 2019b, p. 3) with insights from Johnson-Hanks (2002, 2005) and Di Nunzio (2019). In addition, we have shown the importance of gender and class in shaping the social production of aspiration and young people's scope to act upon these aspirations.

In both our Indian and Indonesian research sites, the importance of a doxic logic was confirmed in which education is regarded as *the* pathway out of farming and towards educated, salaried, non-manual employment. In an era in which at least some years of schooling has become a near universal experience (Gerber and Huijsmans 2016), this logic has come to powerfully shape the aspiration of rural children and youth, too, without however directing them towards clear and accessible pathways taking them there. As a result, rural youth articulate broad and often fluid aspirations, which we argue direct young people's action more in terms of what to avoid, or postpone, then towards planned action towards a particular career goal.

In line with Johnson-Hanks, we find that young people's actions are characterised by a strategy of keeping things open so that they can 'respond effectively to the contingent, sudden, and surprising offers that life can make' (Johnson-Hanks 2005, p. 376). Rural spaces are not very conducive for maintaining such tactics and neither is full-time farming (but note Okali and Sumberg 2012). This goes some way towards explaining the prominence of youth migration for casual urban employment. The



importance rural youth attribute to keeping things open became most evident in relation to life events that were associated with the precise opposite such as ending school and marriage and the gendered manner in which this intersected with full-time farming. For young rural women these life events often had the twofold effect of accelerating the process of becoming a full-time farmer and, thereby, making it virtually impossible to realise alternative career aspirations. For rural men, on the other hand, marriage facilitated a partial involvement in farming in addition to, for example, migrant work. Furthermore, for young men from landed households marriage often triggered the transfer of land which gave them control over the means of production, without this necessarily tying them to full-time farming precisely because their wives were often expected to shoulder the greater share of the farm work. In contrast with many young women, for young men marriage thus allowed them to keep things open a little longer manifested by a partial involvement in farming.

These findings shed new light on understanding the pluriactive character of rural livelihoods. In addition, to its well-studied causes including the declining profitability of smallholder farming, land scarcity, environmental degradation and the emergence of new off- and non-farm opportunities (Rigg 2006, pp. 188–189), we would suggest that it must also be recognised as aspirational: driven by an attempt to keep open options for possible alternative careers that are seen as closed off by committing to career farming too soon. The gendered manner in which such processes unfold suggests that policies and interventions seeking to support young farmers should take more seriously than has been the case to date the role of young women farmers.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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