

**WORK AND WORRY: REVEALING FARM WOMEN'S**  
**WAY OF LIFE**

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## WORK AND WORRY: REVEALING FARM WOMEN'S WAY OF LIFE

### **Suicide, Stress and a Farming Way of Life**

The issue of stress in farming has started to attract attention through periodic reports that farmers as an occupational group experience one of the highest rates of suicide in the UK. For example, the *Samaritans* report that farmers had the second highest risk of suicide (after vets) in the 1980s and that they remained the third highest at risk group in the 1990s (Kelly and Bunting, 1998; Hawton *et al.*, 1998). With one farming suicide every 11 days between 1991 and 1996, it is not surprising that there has been a proliferation of networks established to deal with stress amongst people in rural areas. Research on this trend has been largely confined to the disciplines of psychology and psychiatric health. The medical definitions adopted are restrictive and tend to focus on the dramatic outcome of processes of stress in the form of suicide rather than the dynamics of social processes themselves which form the underlying causes of stress. It is here that rural geographers can be seen to have an important contribution to make to a broadened conceptualization of farming stress (see also Ní Laoire, 2000a). The word 'stress', as the *Oxford Thesaurus* notes, also equates with words such as burden, weight, hassle, distress, pressure or oppression. The research reported in this chapter therefore adopts a non-health based geographical approach to farming stress amongst farming women.

Meetings with rural stress networks confirm that a non-health based approach is rapidly gaining ground as a way to understand fully the lives of family farm individuals and the pressures upon them. In the wake of the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease epidemic, organizations dealing with the perceived problems of 'rural stress' are increasing. *The Farm Crisis Network* highlights a wealth of issues to appreciate including 'tiredness, overwork, anxiety, illness, bereavement, family relationships, farm succession, loneliness, isolation, form filling, regulations, debt, business viability and environmental or ethical concerns'. Many of these groups, such as the *Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution*, focus directly on farmers within rural communities even though changes in rural demography mean that farming families now comprise a minority of the rural population. This in itself can leave many family farm individuals feeling under threat in

what they still consider as ‘their’ community. Organizations generally hold the view that family farming has its own unique set of problems which are thought of as ‘farming problems in a farming community’, born out of a belief in a distinct ‘way of life’. The non-health based approach adopted in this chapter focuses on the constraining and containing dynamics of family farm gender relations. Although stress amongst farming women is placed centre stage, the approach demands that all family members are brought into the research equation, whether active in day-to-day agricultural activities or not. It is the generational family dynamics which sustain the exploitation of patrilineal, familial relationships, and they must be uncovered.

A farming way of life is founded upon distinct sets of customs, perceptions and values, which together define the agricultural experience for individuals, family and non-kin related groups of people. Aspects such as being close to nature, a feeling of independence in decision-making and forming part of a community of like-minded individuals respected by others can be identified as examples of the advantageous qualities embraced by a farming way of life (see also Gasson, 1973). Over time, the benefits of this type of existence have become cherished to such an extent that those involved in farming frequently attempt to pass on this way of life on to their offspring. Of course, in reality some lifestyle advantages may be more imagined than actual, which has resonance with the pastoral myth (Short, 1991). Indeed, it can be argued that it is the idealisation of a farming way of life that individuals are striving to maintain. Under such circumstances, denying or suppressing the harshness of conditions such as long working hours, loneliness and, increasingly, political-economic uncertainty are obvious sources of stress. A duty to the past, a continuation of tradition and a sense of destiny are intertwined with everyday obligations to self, home, family and work. The combined weight of this responsibility can generate a fear of leaving the familiar. In itself, this can immediately be seen as a potential source of stress simply through the non-elective position within which individuals find themselves. However, it is the struggle that individuals now face to match reality with their historically based perceptions of a wholesome farming way of life that is becoming problematic and a key source of stress. Mapping out the gender relations of this farming ‘way of life’ is crucial in beginning to understand why farming

women and men accept and take on certain roles, what these are and the contribution that this internalization (and disruptions to it) makes to 'farming stress' in women.

The needs of farming women, so often called 'farmer's wives', are beginning to be acknowledged as suicide (the ultimate outcome of stress) grows in prominence amongst them. Kelly *et al.* (1995) note that there were 102 suicides of farm women between 1982 and 1992, the highest total for wives of any occupational group. The *Rural Stress Information Network* set up a Women's Stress Network Project in 2002 claiming in their launch publicity flyer that it was needed because:

'the RSIN has had an increased number of stress calls from women over the past year, many on behalf of partners or husbands. In supporting other family members, women may find themselves absorbing the stress of the entire family unit'.

That farming men and women are required to adhere to a patriarchal, patrilineal 'way of life' ideology to perpetuate the British family farm has been established in previous overviews (Whatmore, 1991a and b, Brandth, 2002). Brandth (2002) argues that research is now needed which takes a micro-approach to how identities are constructed and contextualised within these macro-conditions. Hence, this chapter attempts to answer this call by developing an in-depth investigation of particular farm families. The world of farm work allows an explicitly feminist critique to be linked to the specific issue of farming stress for the first time.

With this in mind, it is necessary to develop briefly two conceptual issues in the sections that follow, assisting the subsequent analysis of farming stress. First, theoretical guidance is sought from structural feminism and emerging cultural micro-perspectives within British rural geography. The position that family farming is a cultural activity within global capitalism has lacked theoretical cohesion in agricultural geography. Both capitalism and culture can be identified as fundamental sources of farming stress. The application of structural feminism is needed to produce a better comprehension of gender regimes situated within capitalism. Simultaneously, family farm members draw upon a powerful patriarchal, historical and cultural family farm ideology in their own personal

behaviour. Hence, it is also essential to consider the 'agri-cultural' identity of individual farm women to understand the ease with which ongoing structural changes are accommodated by family farm businesses. For reasons already explained, farming individuals are frequently aiming to adhere to an historical imagination of an idyllic farming 'way of life' and endeavoring to perpetuate this idyll in an increasingly unstable agricultural economy (O'Hagan, 1991). The employment of farming women emerges as one factor especially vulnerable to adjustment in the quest to maintain the way of life. Thus, the sphere of farm women and 'work' represents a major example of where political economy and patriarchal (agri-)culture are wrapped together as a single process. This leads to a second conceptual section examining how farm women's employment choices are constrained and repeatedly challenged by the internalization of a family farm gender identity in which they construct themselves as inferior to men. Such identity is created, maintained and (re)negotiated within the confines of farming as both production and culture: a process that frequently leads to a build-up of stress.

### **Structural Feminism and Agri-cultural Identity**

Throughout the 1990s, research outside the UK has offered a vigorous and explicit feminist critique of agriculture and women's work. Structural feminism has been utilized in an international context to explain the patriarchal gender relations of farming women and men (for example, Alston, 1990 and 1998, Almas and Haugen, 1991; Brandth, 1994). In contrast, feminist conceptualisation has been largely absent in British agricultural geography since the early 1990s (Whatmore, 1991a; Gasson, 1992). Most research continues to conceptualise men as 'the farmer' whilst women carry the label 'farmer's wife'. More recently, the engagement of rural studies with the cultural turn has begun to highlight the potential that feminist insights can offer to more micro-scale approaches in agricultural geography (Morris and Evans, 1999 and 2001; Shorthall, 2002). However, farming individuals, and farm women especially, have been largely absent from work on gender and representations of rurality (Little and Austin, 1996; Hughes, 1997; Little, 2002).

Structural feminism usefully highlights how sweeping material changes have affected our understanding of the links between place and identity (McDowell, 1999). It is clear that the 'way of life' associated with 'agri-culture' is struggling to cope with these changes. As outlined earlier, the 'agri-cultural' identities that farming individuals are trying to retain are increasingly an historical idealisation of a farming 'way of life'. This is because agriculture is undergoing intense rounds of macro-economic and political restructuring that act to disrupt established cultural norms and create tensions within family farm units. Nowhere have more sweeping changes been demanded and witnessed than in the organisation of farm labour. Hence, a highly appropriate focus for this chapter is the extent to which norms are strained by changes required to patterns of 'employment' and how this becomes a source of stress to farm women, whether or not such employment is remunerated.

Individuals within family farms are drawing upon internalisations of their own gender identity to deal with the continued squeeze on the economic viability of their business activities. Their actions and responses to capitalism are driven by an adherence to a frequently unprofitable way of life under current political-economic conditions, but one in which a sense of belonging to place is likely to persist (McDowell, 1999). For the family to remain rooted in the location of their 'historical' family farm, women are required to accept a patriarchal way of life and the exploitation of their labour. It is these cultural practices and social power relations that construct boundaries and rules for behaviour in a particular locale (Smith, 1993). Therefore, structural feminism does provide scope for a research process which embeds the cultural construction of a farming identity within the macroeconomics of global capitalism. From this theoretical position, attention can now be turned to farm women and work as a source of stress.

### **Farm Women and 'Work'**

As Morris and Evans (1999, p.353) argue:

'specific theories of gender relations remain to be exploited fully in agricultural geography, and considerable scope still exists for feminist work within analyses of agricultural change'.

This observation is pertinent to the gendered nature of the work roles of individuals, a subject lacking attention in British agricultural geography. The definition of the word 'work' has remained narrow and ideologically loaded towards paid employment on or off-farm<sup>1</sup>. Gasson (1990) did make an important breakthrough in highlighting women's economic roles in the farm labour process, but offered no explanation as to why men and women carry out gender differentiated work roles. Not until the analysis of Whatmore (1991a) was the essential interdependence between subsistence and reproductive processes acknowledged. Whatmore (1991a) suggests that a commoditization process has reshaped the relations and value systems of family enterprise as they attempt to survive under capitalism. This seems unlikely, as without the cultural socialization into family farming as a 'way of life' the formulation of patriarchal gender relations would not be initially legitimized. Analysis has remained essentially descriptive, offering little questioning of why women and men take on certain roles and thus how the subjectivity of individual farming identities is constructed and maintained.

Ashton (1991) has briefly examined the issue of empowerment through a consideration of women's off-farm employment and concluded that the gender relations of the farm constrain the choice and location of job. Typically, women contribute to the farm, run diversification projects, maintain responsibility for domestic / reproductive activities and gain employment off the farm. This incredible burden goes a long way to sustaining the gender relations of family farming (Ashton, 1991). Yet, as Alston (1990 and 1998) argues, multiple burdens do not necessarily produce multiple choices and are not necessarily preferable. Indeed, Keating and Little (1999) ask if a woman's multiple roles actively prevent inclusion of the title 'farmer' into women's personal identities. Evidence is emerging that off-farm work of farming women is not enhancing the income of women themselves (see also Evans and Ilbery (1996) on pluriactivity). Clearly, an investigation of the employment of farming women is important to an assessment of the burden or

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'work' is used here to encompass the activities of women in the broadest sense, often relating to the 'technical' employment of women in on-farm unremunerated work. Even the word 'employment' has a preferential meaning towards waged labour activities. A difficulty is that many farm women themselves would not consider what they do as 'work' or 'employment', but as merely 'helping out'.

satisfaction this places on them, and ultimately to a better understanding of the cause of ‘farming stress’. As Shorthall (2002) crucially argues, the *cultural weight* of farming mediates the potential for financial independence and more equitable gender relations within the farm household:

‘women are committed to their families and farms and engage in survival strategies to maintain the survival and well-being of both’ (Shorthall, 2002, p. 171).

Off-farm work is, in effect, subsidising the farm and ‘keeping it male’. Shorthall (2002) observes this within a policy context, but does not consider how and why gender identities are constructed. As she so importantly states:

‘women’s motivations for seeking off-farm work must be considered at the level of the household’ (Shorthall, 2002, p.172).

Such an important observation certainly remains to be applied to the notion of farming stress, providing a further rationale for the research reported in this chapter.

It is essential that the patriarchal internal and external expectations placed on British farming women are fully understood to avoid resorting to reifying the title ‘farmer’s wife’ within a romantic ideal of a farming ‘way of life’. Scott’s (1996) research, based in Kentucky, argues that male and female farming individuals refer to women as helpers rather than full and equal partners. Even where Norwegian women identified themselves as a ‘farmer’ rather than ‘farmer’s wife’, they were fearful of losing their feminine identity and whilst not liking housework continued to see this as a central part of that identity (Brandth, 1994). It now seems possible to extend this work to consider how women’s employment is constrained by their family farming identity and draw out its contribution to any stress experienced. Indeed, Alston (1998) has already claimed that it is the gender relations present in family farming which shape the nature of men and women’s labour roles rather than, as Whatmore (1991a) suggests, the other way around.

This chapter argues that the maintenance of a patriarchal family farming ‘way of life’ or ‘agri-culture’ requires the farming woman to act as an appropriate appendant to maintain the status of her farming husband or partner. Her identity is ultimately internalized as



being inferior to the maintenance of 'his'. The title 'farmer's wife' serves to reaffirm intrinsically female attributes. Such a position can be clearly exposed in a fusion of structural feminism with cultural perspectives applied to the illustrative theme of 'work' (in its broadest sense). Farm women are conditioned to behave according to the powerful, patriarchal, historical and cultural family farm ideology already noted. It will be shown that a considerable level of endeavour is now required to adhere to and perpetuate an historical imagination of an idyllic farming 'way of life'. Within an increasingly unstable agricultural economy, it is the need to meet such expectations that is revealed as a prime, but hitherto neglected, source of stress in farming women.

### **The Study of Farming Stress in Powys**

The county of Powys in mid-Wales is selected to examine the relationship between farm women, work and stress. This large rural, predominantly upland area has a higher than average employment in agriculture and is dominated by grass-based, low output, smaller, typically family farm enterprises<sup>2</sup>. Official figures take no account of the large number of family farm members who contribute to the farming economy but are not included in employment statistics. According to the Oxford Study (Hawton *et al.* 1998), Powys has the highest rate of farming suicide in England and Wales, providing an objective rationale for selection. Kelly *et al.* (1995) show that the suicide rate of male farmers in Powys rose from 11.0 per 100,000 in 1985 to 15 per 100,000 in 1995. No comparable figures are available for farm women in Powys other than to note generally that the wives of farmers are recorded as one and a half times more likely to commit suicide than other women of the same age (Kelly *et al.*, 1995).

Objectivity aside, a key difficulty with research of this nature is, as the *Rural Stress Information Network* (2001, p.13) notes, that farming individuals will often only speak 'to their own people or those who can speak the same language'. The *Farm Crisis Network* demonstrates this point in that most of its volunteers are from farming

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<sup>2</sup> The Welsh Agricultural Statistics (1999) demonstrate that 14% of Powys residents aged 16 and over of working age are employed in agricultural, forestry or fishing. This is in comparison to a figure of 8.4% for Herefordshire and 5.5% for Shropshire, both of which border Powys (MAFF, 2000).

backgrounds. Fortunately, the researchers can draw upon a cultural background within Powys, being able to refer to farming relatives, work in agricultural-related industries and a family farm background. Hence, Powys is a suitable locality in which to conduct the research for subjective reasons. Personal contacts facilitated the opening of doors to essential gatekeepers, such as livestock auctioneers, who could speak to potential participants and ask permission for use of their contact details. No family or friends were involved in the research, although they were able to suggest the names, types and locations of farms that might be suitable and allowed their names to be used during the initial contact phase.

Six case study farming families were selected, capturing some diversity of this agricultural business arrangement in Powys. For example, the farms ranged in size from a tenanted farm of 24 hectares to a multiple site owner-occupied holding of 384 hectares. The farms were geographically dispersed throughout the county and varied in the dominant type of agricultural husbandry that they practiced. A repeated life history methodology was utilized involving multiple visits to the farms selected. Group interviews were initially conducted with all members of the farming ‘families’<sup>3</sup>, who were not necessarily all related. The ages of those taking part ranged from 12 to 80. Five interviews with each family member on their own were then carried out and tape-recorded. This amounted to a total of 25 participants from the six farming families over a nine-month period. In quantitative terms, the six case studies generated 120 detailed interviews.

The interviews themselves commenced with the introduction of a topic relating to family farming from which the interviewee was allowed to elaborate. This generated questions which could then be posed throughout the course of the interview or reserved for discussion in future sessions. Heilbrun and Stimpson (1975) acknowledged some time ago that we must attend to what is missing and not merely appropriate responses to

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<sup>3</sup> As with ‘work’, the term ‘family’ is ideologically-loaded, the dangers of using it being well-known and fully appreciated in this research (for one discussion, see Whatmore (1991a) pp.40-43).

existing schema. This observation has become increasingly relevant, for as Hughes *et al.* (2000, p.1) note:

‘the last few years have witnessed an explosion of interest in ethnographic methods in rural geography’.

Gasson identified the importance of peeling away the subjective layers of values as long ago as 1973, but agricultural geographers have been slow to embrace this ethnographic type of methodology. Structured or semi-structured questionnaires have formed the basis of most knowledge from research in the sub-field, even if the actual position of the individual questioned and taken as representing the family farm business is seldom made explicit. As farmers are not one homogenous group (Morris and Evans, 1999), a life history methodology was therefore appropriate to allow interviewees to focus on their decisions, life stages and perceptions of their lives. The aim was to get:

‘below the surface layers of facts and reasons, to the underlying layers of feelings, values and processes’ (Ní Laoire, 2000b, p.85).

This progressive approach to methodology allowed the confidence of interviewees to grow, deeply personal matters to be discussed, and, ultimately, confictions with the ideal of the family farming ‘way of life’ to emerge. The participants discussed their hopes and worries, unhappiness and feelings of being trapped or invigorated by their way of life. It then became possible to map out individual behaviour within the overall gender dynamics of the family farm. It is from these discussions that insights on ‘work’ were obtained and matched to farming way of life expectations to reveal the stresses experienced by individuals generally and women in particular. In the subsequent analysis, individuals’ definitions and evaluations of their experiences are allowed to come through, although the names of the participants have been changed with their agreement to protect their anonymity. Issues of confidentiality were crucial to the research and emphasized at every meeting. This allowed the respondents to delve deeper into their subjectivity and reveal details to a depth rarely achieved in agricultural research. The findings are ordered to address the four main women and work-related issues of defending the way of life, patriarchy and appendant position, technical employment and income generation. All reveal seldom recognized sources of tension which contribute to stress in farming

women, either in the struggle to comply with the farming way of life ideology or in dealing with the repercussions of non-compliance.

### **Defence of the Way of Life**

Farming couples who participated in the research, such as Catrin and Ithel, see themselves not only as trying to maintain a rural way of life, but also a ‘superior’ farming ‘way of life’. Catrin and Ithel remain on a farm that is no longer economically viable yet fight for its existence because they believe it offers them a distinctive culture worthy of preservation. Ithel is the third generation of his family to be farming on the farm and looks around with pride when he suggests “how else could we afford to live somewhere like this?” The house and location are indeed impressive. However, as Catrin takes their children to school she says “there are only one or two farmers wives around now – we’re in the minority, so we stick together”. Catrin agrees with Ithel that they must hang on to something precious.

Catrin and Ithel view incomers as threatening the ‘proper’ farming way of life of their community. Catrin claims defensively “they try and take over the village life and look down on us – they haven’t got a clue about farming – it’s a way of life”. Rhodrhi and Beth, who farm on the outskirts of a market town, similarly feel that “townie ways are creeping in”. Beth reminisces that “years ago everyone in the community was involved in farming, helped with the harvests or were businesses serving the farms”. Rhodri interjects “this isn’t the case any more – they look down on us now – think we’re cruel to animals and create smells”. Geraint and Mair, who farm on the edge of a village, also feel threatened by smart new houses being built for the commuter market. Geraint objects “they only sleep here, but they think they own the place – we don’t want townies changing the community ... even ten years ago most of the village women were helping with potato picking – it was a social event!” Poignantly, Geraint’s farm can no longer be viably engaged in potato production. Of course, economic decline is symbolic of the lessened influence of farming individuals within the community even if most participants are reluctant to accept that they do not hold the status of their ancestors and that ‘agriculture’ is no longer the dominant cultural focus within rural locales. Emrhys, who farms

a relatively large multiple 384 hectare holding, is rather alone when he says that “family farming has changed, but it will take a generation to accept that and change ... lifestyles”. He continues “farming communities have changed, farmers will have to change also and accept that farming alone will not economically provide them with the way of life they are hanging on to and that they must embrace their new neighbours ... we have to embrace changes in rural population and work with incomers”.

One perception on farm women and work within a changing rural society emerges directly through Gwen, who with husband Huw has just moved into the main farmhouse on a 41 ha holding. She says “they [incomers] think us women are just at home all day cooking in the kitchen – they don’t understand what our lives are really like”. Thus, both farming women and men feel that their lifestyles are threatened within their ‘own’ communities by new people who do not understand family farming. As Dilys, a lady who works a small farm, remarks “they don’t understand that if we were doing it for the money we wouldn’t be here – it’s a way of life, it’s in us and you can’t take it out of us”. Maintaining a presence in rural areas requires ever-greater exploitation of family employment and increases the strain on family relationships from which this exploitation radiates. Only if farming women accept the farming ‘way of life’ will their families be able to continue living and working on family farms, but this will lead them to become retrenched in an ideology that is ultimately patriarchal and exploitative of the role of ‘farmer’s wife’. More specifically, it requires farming women to act as an appropriate appendant to their male partner, supplement the farm with their employment and generally comply with the patriarchy of family farming.

### **Women as Appendant**

A woman’s position as ‘farmer’s wife’ and mother must be commensurate with the life cycle of her male partner, whether married or not, to perpetuate the patriarchal ‘way of life’ of family farming. Whatmore (1991b) acknowledged that women’s involvement in farm labour activities was dependent upon her life cycle stage, constrained by the primacy of reproductive duties. This analysis is only partial as it does not consider the importance of the male life cycle in determining women’s work options. The farming

‘way of life’ further demands that the employment of farming women be commensurate with the male life cycle stage. It is from this central point of gender relations that all work activities radiate. A woman’s role is to act as an appropriate appendant to the farming life cycle of her male partner. The latter is itself affected by the presence of a male heir and the status of farming men within the community. It is this blueprint of patrilineal relations that impacts upon her employment choices, with stressful repercussions, especially if women do not adhere to such family farming ideology.

As males move position within the farming family, and regardless of the extent of female involvement in agricultural activities, the title ‘farmer’ is not accepted within women’s gender identity. Even Rhodri and Beth, a couple who came to a small tenanted farm that was not inherited, still aim to adhere to the implied gender status of ‘farmer’ and ‘farmer’s wife’. Throughout this transition, farm wives’ roles alter accordingly. Gareth and Alvine are entering retirement after having increased the size of their farm during their forty-year marriage. Alvine says “it’ll be strange not being a farmer’s wife any more”. As she admits “we’ve both worked to keep the farm going for Jack [their son] – I don’t know if we would have tried to expand if we hadn’t had a son, but we wanted something better to pass on”. This is a difficult time for them because generational roles are being re-negotiated. Gareth is becoming the ‘retired farmer’ and Jack moving from ‘farmer’s son to ‘the farmer’. On a different farm, Huw also agrees that “there can only be one boss farmer”. This term emerged during the interviews to encapsulate the status farming men aspire to during their life cycle.

For a farm woman considering employment, there is also the status of her male partner to consider. Gareth, facing life as a retired farmer, berates his wife for considering a cleaning job claiming “it would be a shame, I’ve worked hard to gain status in the community and it would make me look like a failure. Alvine herself says “I would like to have a little job to get me out of the house”, but she is concerned that this would tarnish Gareth’s position. Carrying out lower status off-farm employment would evidently signal some deficiency in the male farmer and the failure of the farm business. Gwen, a woman in her thirties, would not contemplate going back to catering as she says “I’m quite

contented to be a farmer's wife, I don't want to go back to working for a pittance". It is somewhat paradoxical that low status off-farm employment, such as cleaning or catering, acquires not only acceptance but a degree of prestige in an on-farm situation. Huw, Gwen's husband, likes the farmhouse to be tidy and she says "the inside tidiness of the house reflects how people see the outside farm". Wynne, a dairy farmer, suggests that the reason why such work is important on-farm is because "you don't want to let people know if your farm isn't doing well". His partner, Siân, is a veterinary surgeon and Wynne admits "she keeps the farm going and is respected in the area". This particular type of professional employment is not seen as detrimental to his farming status and even has the potential to enhance it.

The employment choices made by these farming women in Powys provide examples of how gender identities are constrained by a subjective internalization of their role as an appropriate appendant to the life cycle and status of their farming partner. Employment taken by women must fit into the wider needs of the family farm and men and women's roles within it. This appears to be the case irrespective of the size or tenure of the family farm. Both Beth, who lives on a small, tenanted farm and Megan, a General Practitioner living on a large farm, describe themselves as 'farmer's wives'. A potentially busy life away from the farm makes little difference, for as Megan states "I fit my work around Emrhys and the farm". Both these women consider their dominant role to be as a supportive 'farmer's wife'. To enable them to live the 'farming way of life', women such as Catrin are required to enact an appropriate version of a 'farmer's wife' commensurate with Ithel's status as a 'farmer'. This can only be achieved by Catrin's adherence to patriarchal gender roles. Catrin affirms "we want this way of life for our children and don't want to live in a little box in the town".

When women do not comply, perhaps exercising employment choices incompatible with family farming ideology, there are serious implications for the breakdown of the blueprint of patrilineal relations. Huw, a man in his late thirties, could give examples from his friends "whose wives didn't want the hard work – they've now divorced their husbands and split the farms to get a settlement". As Huw could confirm, many younger

male farmers are wary of marriage and unsure if their generation of women will adhere to the exploitation of employment for the sake of preserving an ideology of family farming. One woman in the research who did not adhere to the family farm ideology in terms of taking on or fulfilling the role of 'farmers wife' is divorced from her husband. Annie is now in her sixties and as her ex-husband Alun states "she never wanted anything to do with the farm and she was never interested". Alun sees the breakdown of his marriage as a direct result of his ex-wife's refusal to comply with the duties of being a 'farmer's wife'. As Alun says sharply "she always had her money, it went in her own pocket". Alun has now passed the farm onto his sons because, as he said to Annie, "you won't ruin me but you'll ruin our sons". Alun is scornful of the divorce settlement he has had to pay and sees the transference of ownership to his sons as a way around a larger payout. He cannot understand why Annie is, in his view, risking the farming future of his sons.

### **The 'Technical' Employment of Farming Women**

Women are often discouraged from taking off-farm employment because they can be 'technically' employed on the farm. As Beth, a woman who works a small tenanted farm with her husband, states "going back to nursing would be difficult – well it would upset the books and he couldn't manage without me". She would like to leave farming and return to nursing but can see no future for her husband away from farming. Maintaining her position as a 'farmers wife' comes first to Beth. She is proud of this term and considers that maintaining the existence of their small farm for her husband's well-being is part of the 'farmer's wife' role.

A revealing case of technical employment is illustrated by Jack and Carys. Jack stands to inherit a large amount of capital, the status of 'farmer' and the farming 'way of life' from his parents (Gareth and Alvine). He is only too aware that his personal behaviour and choice of partner may have jeopardized these ambitions. Carys became pregnant before marriage, leading Jack's father to admit in a separate interview that he was "very disappointed, although Carys may turn out to be something good, but we have to protect Jack". Jack loves farming and says "that's all I've wanted to do – take over the farm, introduce new ideas". Jack is fortunate in that Carys also wants them to inherit the



farming 'way of life', so they have both worked hard to improve generational relations. But, as Carys is only too aware "we're on trial – they're going to see how we get on when we move to the farmhouse". Jack declares "I want it all sorted out, the partnership and everything when we move – I'm afraid I'll just be a slave to my father otherwise". When Jack becomes the 'boss farmer', he knows it will give him greater control over decision-making, enabling him to be a dominant force in family relationships and give him greater status in the community.

In the meantime, Jack reveals "at 24, I just get pocket money". This lack of autonomy over his income makes the economic position of Carys and their two young daughters extremely precarious. Many young mothers known to Carys are married to 'farmers sons' and "they are feeling pressurized to work on the farm". She goes on to explain that, in reality, they receive no remuneration as it gets siphoned back into the family farm to perpetuate a 'way of life' that is struggling to support one family, never mind two. Carys' questioning of this practice is making relations with her in-laws particularly fraught. Through new benefit regulations, childcare costs can be recouped and a farm worker is replaced by the free labour of the young partner of a 'farmers son'. However, Carys asks of Jack "... do you think I'm going to work like that and be expected to work like your father expects your mother to work?" In contrast, Carys' mother-in-law, Alvine, merely accepts her considerable burden as helping out when dictated by her role as farmer's wife/mother and does not even consider it to be 'work'. Clearly, younger women especially are questioning the exploitation of their labour, which signals problems for family relationships and, in turn, the continuation of the farm. Despite such discontent about the amount of control her in-laws exert over her life and the expectations placed on her employment options, it is revealing that Carys retains a desire to achieve the status of 'farmer's wife' in support of her husband.

### **Income from Farm Women's Employment**

Shorthall, (2002) notes that the intertwining of family and farm ideology compels women to use their employment to fuel a 'way of life'. The interviews reveal that farming women

place little importance on the economic contribution of their employment to the farm business. Rather, the main emphasis is upon helping out and supporting their families. Women such as Siân (vet) and Megan (G.P.) are supplementing the farm income whilst fitting their careers around the geographical location of the farm. Their career aspirations are subordinate to both the supremacy of the farming 'way of life' and their roles as 'farmer's wife' and mother. Siân admits "I never intended staying in the area, I always planned to move to a bigger practice, so I've got bored now". Siân and Wynne are unmarried but she refers to herself as a 'farmer's wife'. She sees her role as supporting the 'way of life' chosen first and foremost by Wynne in order that he fulfills himself as a farmer. As she admits "it was his dream". Wynne did not consult her about buying the farm. Wynne bought the farm with help from his mother and Siân has no ownership status in the farm. Even so, Wynne acknowledges "we wouldn't be here without Siân's income and we rely on it more as time goes on".

Such a situation is repeated on the 101 hectare farm of Ithel and Catrin. They both hold off-farm jobs to maintain what they consider to be a valuable way of life. Ithel owns the farm and proudly claims "it's all mine". The farm's function is to sustain a way of life rather than generate a profit, or as Ithel puts it, the farm is only required to "wash its face". Catrin declares "I'm working for my family. We want to stay here. This is the way of life we want and we don't want to move". Ithel affirms "we rely on Catrins' wages for groceries and incidentals. We couldn't live here without her wage". Throughout the interviews, Catrin identifies herself as a 'farmer's wife'. It is this title that forms the fundamental base for her gender identity and her employment which provides an income supplement to the farm. Catrin refers to the farm as 'his' and the overdraft as 'his'. She juggles her work as a nurse with the care of their three children under five. Here, a direct consequence of the stress that weighs on farm women is observed. Catrin has been off work recently with ill-health and she says "it was getting too much". The accumulation of stress can be seen indirectly with Dilys, a farm woman in her fifties, who is employed off-farm in dairying. Her job necessitates a 5.00am start seven days a week. The economic unviability of their farm also dictates that Dilys works the farm whilst her husband is employed off-farm as a contractor.

Women like Siân and Catrin remain prepared to supplement farm income through their employment. Many have hopes like Siân that “maybe one day my son will take over”. Siân claims “it’s more important for me to be a good mum now”. It is the mother/wife role and patrilineal inheritance that are most important to her and, of course, this must be respected. Dilys was another participant whose gender identity is ultimately that of ‘farmer’s wife’ and mother, extending this role into her employment activities. She returns from her off-farm employment by 8.00am to cook her husband’s breakfast and deliver her son to school because “he still expects his breakfast ready and his butties made”. All that Dilys requires from her employment is that it may enable the family farm to remain in existence long enough to witness a resurgence in agriculture and for her twelve year-old son to take it over if he so wishes.

### **Towards New Conceptions of Farming Stress**

The world of work has provided one theme through which to expose the multi-faceted and complex processes that contribute to stress amongst farming women. A patriarchal farming ‘way of life’ leads both farming men and women to feel burdened by the expectations of familial relations, situated as they are against the macro-level backdrop of declining economic fortunes in the agrarian sector. The interviews reveal that the farm families in the Powys case studies rely heavily for their existence upon the employment of farming women who are required to accept a patriarchal farming ‘way of life’ ideology. This leads farming women in particular to act as an appropriate appendant to their male partner and to support the family through particular employment patterns. Degrees of compliance and non-compliance with this patriarchal ideology can be observed as central components to accumulation of stress within a farming household and consequently in farming women. Adherence to this ideology is necessary for gender relations to be maintained and the patrilineal culture of family farming to remain intact.

There are signs that this situation is slowly facing disruption. This is illustrated by the position of Carys who is not prepared to be ‘technically’ employed and have her labour exploited, thereby acting to fray generational family relationships. Gareth, her father-in-

law, views this not as a reasonable reaction to an enormous potential work burden, but as a threat to the protection of his sons' inheritance because women are, as he puts it, "gold-diggers". Women like Annie do not see why family and farm business should be so intertwined or why their income should supplement farming incomes for their sons to inherit. Annie was an exception in this research, but demonstrative of a potentially much more common process as one, albeit dramatic, way of dissipating her stress associated with farming. The issues of divorce and monetary settlement have themselves been largely beyond the scope of this chapter but clearly contribute to a build-up of stress across farm family generations and require further research.

The reality for many farm women is that the option to 'call it a day' with farming is remote. Even Carys, who refused to be 'technically' employed for the good of the family farm, aspired to become the 'farmers wife'. It is this aspiration, so crucial for the survival of the British patrilineal family farm, that stress serves to undermine. How long women will be prepared, or indeed able under mounting stressful conditions, to value a farming way of life, act as an appropriate appendant to male partners to suppress their employment interests, maintain multiple burdensome roles and continue supplementing farm income is highly questionable. When farming women can no longer accept these dimensions of the patriarchal ideology of family farming, the present manifestation and future reproduction of British family farming may become unsustainable. Future research into stress should be less concerned with health-based outcomes such as mental illness and suicide. As this chapter has attempted to illustrate through the theme of work, issues such as women posing a threat to the family farm, farming men's views of marriage and the difficulties farm women find with internalising the title of 'farmer' within their consciousnesses appear to represent far more fruitful lines of inquiry.

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