

# The role of women in United Kingdom farm businesses

**Zoë Kempster**

Aberystwyth University, UK

**Wyn Morris** 

Aberystwyth University, UK

**Louise Manning**

University of Lincoln, UK

**Robert Bowen**

Cardiff University, UK

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## Abstract

The global empowerment of women has been, and remains to be, a continuing issue, especially within the workplace. The agribusiness industry is no exception, where continuation of gender bias and stereotypes positions women as under-represented. Whilst the significance of women in farm businesses is evidenced, their relative invisibility in policy discourse is clear, despite the number of women developing careers in the industry increasing. This qualitative study examines the self-identified roles of women in United Kingdom (UK) farm businesses by interviewing individual participants in the sector ( $n = 8$ ). The literature highlights four roles: the farmer, farm manager, off-farm income careerist and entrepreneur with an on-farm diversified business which forms a theoretical framework to structure the interviews. Findings show five emergent self-identification of role characterisations as being the mother, a decision-maker, a supporter, a labourer and an entrepreneur within a personal role profile. Thus, whilst externally identified roles consider women's status and contribution in a siloed job role structure, the multiplicity of roles that women undertake are much more nuanced and contiguous. The research contribution is an understanding of the variance and multiplicity of tasks undertaken which indicate the extensive work and contributory efforts that women instinctively provide to the farming business and the farm household structure. Findings contribute by establishing a new conceptualisation of the contributions of women to farm businesses informing rural policymakers, to consider the roles of women at farm household level rather than simply focussing on the gender characteristics of the principal farmer.

## Keywords

Agriculture, farm, women, role

## Introduction

Globally the empowerment of women continues to be an issue, especially within the workplace. The agribusiness industry is no exception with women being underrepresented, due in part to the continuation of gender bias and stereotypes (Ball, 2020; Glazebrook et al., 2020). The farming environment is heavily gendered in favour of males, where it is more likely that farmers and farm employees are male (Smith et al., 2020). Despite this, the number of women entering careers in the industry is

increasing, even given the stereotypical transition via succession between males. 28.5% of employees in United Kingdom (UK) elementary agricultural operations are female, with the total number increasing by 40% since 2004 (Nomis, 2020). In addition, the number of female

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### Corresponding author:

Wyn Morris, Aberystwyth Business School, Aberystwyth University,  
Penglais Campus, Aberystwyth, SY23 3DY, UK.Email: [dmm@aber.ac.uk](mailto:dmm@aber.ac.uk)

students studying in UK higher education in agriculture, food and related study programmes during the 2019/2020 academic year is almost double that of males (HESA, 2020). Whilst the number of women in agriculture are increasing, only 22.4% of managers or proprietors in UK agriculture and horticulture are female (Nomis, 2020), raising questions about the status of women within the industry, their roles and their overall contribution to corporate and family businesses. Whilst studies have examined the role of women in farm businesses, previous research has suggested there are still many gaps in the literature (Dunne et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021). With the exception of literature reviews (Ball, 2020; Dunne et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021) and book chapters by Shortfall et al. (2017, 2019, 2020), recent literature on developed nations such as Ireland and the UK are limited to, for example, Cush et al. (2018). Generally, research on the role of British women in the farming/agribusiness industry is aged, such as work by Gasson (1980, 1992) or Shortall and Kelly (2002). Research on the role of women within agriculture and agribusiness in the global North includes the United States (Carruth and Logan, 2002; Trauger, 2004; Keller, 2014), France (Saugeres, 2002), Sweden (Pettersson and Cassel, 2014) and Germany (Lehberger and Hirschauer, 2015). Although this research has been conducted in countries with similar farm business typology to the UK, cultural differences may still exist in terms of national policies and the perspectives of women in the industry. The lack of contemporary empirical research reflecting UK women's contribution to the overall resilience of the farming business including their financial contribution towards household income, their roles and role characteristics makes this a topic of interest, and as such, the primary data gathered during this study is both timely and necessary.

This qualitative study examines the self-identified roles of women in UK farm businesses by interviewing individual participants in the sector ( $n=8$ ). Their contribution is assessed in terms of their level of responsibility, the time they allocate to the business and the particular tasks they undertake. This research also explores the self-reported challenges and barriers experienced by women involved in agriculture. The structured literature review that informs this article led to the conceptualisation of four job roles: the farmer, farm manager, off-farm income careerist and entrepreneur of an on-farm diversified business. The data is analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This study is situated in the experiences of those interviewed and it is those experiences that drive the empirical research. The work informs both industry and policy of the multifaceted contribution of women on farms, notably in the context of the UK, and further contributes by establishing a new conceptualisation of the contributions of women to farm businesses as an entrepreneur, decision-maker, supporter, mother and labourer. Based on the findings of this research, we argue that the role of

women in agriculture has evolved to one which is of multi-skilled/multi-characterisation. Indeed, the study finds that the ways in which women performs these role characterisations varies between farm businesses and also for the individual lived experiences of the women interviewed. For each women, role characteristics can change over a woman's working and personal life, especially the role of mother, support and carer.

## Theoretical framing

Historically, the role of women in a farm business is a 'house-wife' or an 'assistant farmer' (Gasson, 1980) where very few women work the land as a full-time role. Wisner (1975; cited by Tanner, 1999) states that 'women make a more important contribution to agriculture than they do to any other single industry', but whilst women are said to have a significant role (Tara-Satyavathi et al., 2010), their contribution is unrecognised and their work invisible with males being dominant (Annes et al., 2021; Brandth, 2002; Damisa and Yohanna, 2007; Nain and Kumar, 2010). However, much of this research took place in the global South including Nigeria (Damisa and Yohanna, 2007) and India (Nain and Kumar, 2010), where the farming and family context is different from that of the developed North. Indeed, women's contribution is positioned as low value compared to men's (Alston, 1990; Lewis, 1998). Dunne et al. (2021) reviewed 184 studies published between 1970 and 2020 that considered women's roles in agriculture with the most recent being focused on developed nations, such as Ireland and the UK (Ball, 2020; Cush et al., 2018; Shortall et al., 2017; Shortall et al., 2019; Shortall et al., 2020). Job roles cited across these studies include: the traditional farm housewife, working farm member (farm assistant, subordinate manager), woman farmer (traditional women farmer, professional woman farmer); and off-farm occupation (dual or off-farm occupation with limited engagement with the farm), where women have limited access to land, education and organisations. Gasson (1980) bases her evaluation of women's contribution to farm and rural life using three identified role types: farm housewife, working farmwife and woman farmer. Brasier et al. (2014) uses work from Burton and Wilson (2006) and McGuire (2010) to develop a theoretical model for role identities of farming women highlighting: *primary operator*, *farm wife-helper* and *off-farm income careerist*. Combining these sources with the work of Brandth (2002) and Barlett (1993), four roles are positioned in this research: a farmer, a farm manager, an off-farm income careerist and an entrepreneur of a diversified business. Some terms have been positioned specifically in this article and are now described for clarity, contribution and to explore each role.

The term contribution can be defined as 'the action of contributing or giving as one's part to a common fund or

stock... to bring about a result' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). It is the input and involvement that a person provides for a given role, and the impact that they have on their surrounding environment. In relation to a woman's contribution to a farm business, it could involve her physical work and skillset, the influence she has on decision-making or even the emotional support she offers. Contribution can also be considered through financial aspects, that is, the monetary value provided to farm household income, whether that income is generated within or outside of the farming business. Generating income through off-farm activity is a recognised resilience strategy for farm-based households (Gasson, 1988; Morris et al., 2017; Shucksmith et al., 1989). However, empirical evidence of female contribution is scant in related studies.

Definitions of role are multiple, addressing the commitment of an individual to a specified job with the responsibility to carry it out with the highest degree of one's ability; the 'functional niche assigned to each member of a group, carrying the expectations of peers regarding individual contributions to that group' (Kurian, 2013: 263); 'a socially expected behaviour pattern usually determined by an individual's status in a particular society,' a given duty, or 'a function or part performed especially in a particular operation or process' (Merriam-Webster, nd). This suggests that a role could be defined as a job description or as a group of functions or tasks that create a self-identified role. Farming is not just an occupation for many farmers and farm workers, it is often positioned as a vocation, a way of life that extends beyond employment to provide personal meaning (Groth and Curtis, 2017).

### **Farmer**

One role of women within the farming/agribusiness industry is as the farmer. Smith et al. (2020) define a farmer as operating a farm or cultivating land, that is, the physical work within the farm environment where mechanisation has made tasks physically easier than centuries ago (Smith et al., 2020). In her study forty years ago on farm women role types, Gasson (1980: 171) identifies the woman farmer to be 'farm centred... regarding farming as their most time consuming, most important and most enjoyable activity'. They are not the assistant to another farmer and participate in tasks that were perceived at the time to be masculine, they value their work, and gain satisfaction from the independence and pride that farming sustains (Gasson, 1980). Other sources suggest difficulties for the female farmer including self-identity especially in communities 'where masculinity and femininity have been shaped over time by the gendered symbolic categories of farmer and farmwife' (Keller, 2014: 2). This was often reinforced where physical strength requirements forced farming women into the house (Trauger, 2004), and where women traditionally had a role in feeding large number of manual

farm workers. As mechanisation increased, this role of feeding workers on the farm reduced, in line with a reducing workforce. Female work was perceived as lesser, secondary and complementary to physical work (Saugeres, 2002), and where women undertook work on farm it was work such as handling and caring for small livestock that were kept indoors. This stereotyping is interpreted by Pini (2005) who suggests that women cross the traditional gender division of labour if they partake in physical on-farm tasks, deemed to be men's work, especially if this includes the use of large farming machinery. This notion of the farmer in a male sphere in the global North is considered by Smith et al. (2020) and Glazebrook et al. (2020) when considering farm productivity, but not by Dunne et al. (2021).

### **Farm manager**

The farm manager is the individual who 'manages' the day-to-day operations of the farm, that is, their role in combining [available] resources appropriately (Nuthall, 2010), the land, the labour and the capital (Dexter and Barber, 1960), focusing on business aspects rather than land custodianship. An analysis of the role of farm manager recognises that management is complex, requiring sufficient knowledge of the external industry environment as well as involving factors such as the market, economics, decision-making and implementing strategies based on dynamic changes that occur (Malcolm, 2004). He stated, 'the outstanding characteristic of the most successful [farm] managers... is their mastery of information' (Malcolm, 2004: 53).

Societal presumption, that women are the principal family caregivers, will position that this caregiving role interferes with their role as a farm manager (Dunne et al., 2021; Lehberger and Hirschauer, 2015). A lack of rural childcare is also a challenge for farm managers, both male and female, so the physical nature of being a mother can be a career barrier. Having to take time away from a farm managerial career during maternity periods can lead to career downgrading creating social pressure or financial risks (Lehberger and Hirschauer, 2015), as with a female's career in many other sectors.

### **Off-farm income careerist**

Off-farm income can be considered as a dual occupation, that is, either working both on the farm and off the farm or solely in an off-farm occupation (Dunne et al., 2021). Thus, a woman can be an off-farm careerist where their primary role is in employment off-farm, and also work on the farm, that is, the woman's role involves pluriactivity (Brandth, 2002; Dunne et al., 2021). According to Gasson (1992), the greatest number of women in the farm labour force are married to farmers and assist their families in roles, differentiating from women farming independently, as farm

managers or farm workers, or from female farm workers. Off-farm income generated by women often supports farm survival, aiding the male farmer through supplementing the household income (Carruth and Logan, 2002; Price, 2010), and providing additional economic security. Therefore, the role of a woman as an off-farm income careerist is an important contribution to overall business performance and earning their own money encourages women to have self-assurance, visibility and autonomy (Brandth, 2002). Although they provide additional income off-farm, many women are also actively involved in the farm business.

### *Entrepreneur involved with an on-farm diversified business*

The female family member generally instigates and manages entrepreneurial (non-core) farm diversified activities (McElwee, 2006), as they generally have greater transferable skills, are not tied to the day-to-day activities giving them more time and energy for a new business and are more innovative, recognising the potential for business opportunities (Bosworth and Wilson-Youlden, 2019; Smith et al., 2020), compared to their male counterparts. Diversification can be driven by combined and interconnected economic, social and personal motives, but primarily the driver is an alternative economic strategy to support and enable the farm business' survival and socially and personally, is a preferred option as women can be independent and work from home, important for those with children and limited rural childcare (Pettersson and Cassel, 2014). An example of this is seen through the female managing the agritourism activities of the family business as a means of supplementing farm income (Stirzaker et al., 2022).

### *Summary*

The literature suggests that one role is not mutually exclusive of the others over the course of a woman's life as the role of farming woman may change in line with the business and family demands and their position in the family, indeed they may have multiple roles simultaneously. This notion of multifunctionality is found in the current literature (Brandth, 2002; McElwee and Al-Riyami, 2003; Pettersson and Cassel, 2014), but there is also an aspect of fluidity and circularity as the women substitute one role for another, or in a family business may take one role as farmer's daughter, but over time could become farmer, farm manager or farmer's wife, then in time farmer's mother (Smith et al., 2021). The methodology is now defined.

### *Methodology*

The research exercise now presented is predominantly a descriptive one with the objective of providing a new

conceptualisation of women farmer' types that can inform future empirical work. Based on the research aim, a qualitative methodology is adopted involving semi-structured interviews with representatives of the four roles positioned in this research and informed by the structured review of literature namely a farmer, farm/office manager, off-farm income careerist and enterprise entrepreneur. A purposive sampling method is used, to identify the interviews, women that associate themselves with the aforementioned four roles, that is, they represented cases of the roles (Yin, 2009). The interview guide is designed to gather data focussing on the primary role, self-reported contribution and experiences of the eight female participants in their farming businesses (Table 1) distinguishing participants by allocated job role, age and farm business type.

The UK is chosen as the setting for this research due to its multifunctional and non-homogenous farm business structure. The use of semi-structured interviews is a method that is consistent with related research on the role of women in agriculture (Keller, 2014; Pettersson and Cassel, 2014). The interviews (n=8) provide rich data and this research is similar in sample size to previous studies in the subject area (e.g. see Joosse and Grubbström, 2017; Morris et al., 2017). Maximum variation sampling is used for participants to be purposively selected to ensure that each of the four roles identified in the theoretical framework are represented with interviews being conducted at the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021.

Due to the COVID-19 regulations, which restricted travel and contact with individuals, interviews were conducted virtually using video technology. Interviews were recorded, and transcribed verbatim, with consent of the participant, to ensure that the data obtained was a true representation of the interviews. Rigour was sought at all times through the research process, from the formulation of the

**Table 1.** Profile of interview participants.

Participant	Self-identified role	Age	Farm business type
P1	Farmer	20	Dairy
P2	Farmer	24	Dairy and beef
P3	Farm manager	52	Cereals and poultry
P4	Farm manager	51	Potatoes, carrots, cereals and maize
P5	Off-farm careerist	56	Chicken, beef and sheep
P6	Off-farm careerist	54	Cereals and maize
P7	Entrepreneur of a diversified business	51	Beef and pigs Diversified business: farm shop
P8	Entrepreneur of a diversified business	28	Beef and sheep Diversified business: vineyard

interview guide based on the literature review, to the sampling method, and use of a structured analysis process. Interview data is analysed through the six-step Braun and Clarke (2006) process of thematic analysis. First, on a case-by-case basis comparing the similarities and differences of the interviewees' roles, contributions, experiences and perceptions, this comparison involved a number of factors such as role type and age. The thematic analysis process includes first and second-cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014) of the interview transcripts, establishing initial codes, evaluating the codes and facilitating the formulation of themes. NVivo 12 is used to ensure that data analysis is conducted in a structured and rigorous manner. Initially, 98 unique codes were outlined from the interview data, which related to 10 themes, as shown in Table 2.

The 10 themes from the data analysis process include motherhood, decision-making, capability, experience, entrepreneurial, community, driving force, physicality, stereotypes and change. Further evaluation of these themes, and a consideration of the four main roles of women in agriculture emergent from the literature review, led to the identification of five key contributions of women in agribusiness, based on dominant role characteristics which emerged from the data. These are contributions as an entrepreneur, decision-maker, supporter, labourer and mother, which are discussed in the following section.

## Findings and discussion

### Entrepreneur

One of the job roles that arose from the literature was on-farm diversification entrepreneur. The respondents asserted that if women are creative, determined, hard-working, resilient, forward-thinking and have a positive attitude, they can prove themselves in the industry and be successful, that is, that the traits of entrepreneurship extended beyond a diversified enterprise into the agricultural enterprises too. It was more common for off-farm careerists and diversified entrepreneur participants to comment on this theme outside of farming activities.

“Women have the entrepreneurial and creative skills to work close with the market.” (P5)

“Women have definitely proved themselves as being equal in farming. Anything is possible, which I think is wonderful.” (P7)

“You can often see the other side of the picture that maybe a male may not see; you bring something different to the table.” (P8)

Farmer and farm manager participants that take part in the physical on-farm work do not self-identify as much with being successful as those working externally or in

diversified enterprises. This concurs with Brasier et al. (2014) who found that women conduct multiple roles on and off the farm, including bookkeeping, and developing entrepreneurial opportunities, although pluriactivity can take its emotional and mental toll (Carruth and Logan, 2002; Daghigh Yazd et al., 2019).

### Decision-maker

Decision-making can involve day-to-day tactical decisions, and long-term strategic decisions. For daily operational decisions, the farmer and diversified entrepreneurs stated they had all the decision-making power, and diversified entrepreneurs reported they had control over larger financial decisions, as well as the farm manager participants, that is, they had a high level of control.

“I have all control of the business, so I make all of the larger long-term decisions which include most of the financial decisions and then I manage who makes small day-to-day decisions, which tend to be more tactical.” (P4)

A common aspect that arose with respect to the long-term decisions was the nature of family involvement. Seven participants work on or contribute to their own family farm business and six of these mentioned the decision-making process involving discussion between family members. Off-farm careerists stated they were included in long-term financial discussions initiated by their male family members who run the business, but do not finalise the decision.

“I am involved in discussions with relation to major financial decisions and have an input into these.” (P6)

On the other hand, it is identifiable that farm managers and diversified entrepreneur participants, whose roles consist of having more control in the business, discuss their thoughts with their male family members, but then proceed to make the final decision themselves.

“Decisions are all with me in the business. We will chat over machinery purchases and then discuss and decide from there, but everything else is with me.” (P3)

“I have full control on decision-making... but I always run all decisions through my dad and brother, so we work together to figure out a solution for any problems.” (P8)

These findings agree with Bokemeier and Garkovich (1987), who determined that a woman's role in decision-making varies depending on their defined roles in the farm business. The participants in this study actively

**Table 2.** Thematic analysis findings.

Home	Decision-making	Capabilities	Background	Entrepreneurial contributions	Role model	Support	Farmer role	Challenges	Development
Children	Discussions	Prove	Education	Entrepreneurial	Community	Driving force	Physicality	Stereotypes	Change
Family	Contribution	Hard work	Awareness	Creative	Social media	Inspiring	Labour	Perception	Positivity
Mother versus career	Input	Determination	Development	Confidence	Networks	Encouraging	Arable versus livestock	Hesitation	Mechanisation
Support	Involvement	Capability	Skills	Determination	Interaction	Supportive	Husbandry skills/ motherly	Masculine	Respect
Responsibility	Ideas	Break barriers	Experience	Hard work	Influences	Teamwork	Caring	Inequality	Generation differences
Work from home	Inclusion	Passion	Opportunities	Skills	Role models	Positive	Gentle	Sexism	Valued
Paperwork	Family business	Presence	Encouragement	Initiative	Inspiration	Looking ahead	Mechanisation	Judgemental	Equality
	Equality	Resilience	Equal	Opportunities	Connections	Initiative	Masculine culture	Derogatory	Easier than ever before
	Decision-making	Extra effort	Upbringing	Endless possibilities	Confidence	Calming	Help	Arable versus livestock	Self-infliction
		Attitude			Reality	Valuable		Shock/surprise	Social media
		Perseverance			Awareness				Education
		Control			Respect				

involved in the day-to-day farm operations demonstrate more control in decision-making, compared to those who are not.

### Supporter

The role of women as drivers and supporters of the farm business emerged from the interviews. Participants used vocabulary such as inspiring, encouraging, teamwork, positive, initiative and valuable to describe a woman's role in a supportive manner to her family and colleagues. Off-farm careerist and diversified entrepreneur participants are much more likely to articulate a sense of support to the family business as they are not immediately involved in the day-to-day operations of the farm itself as much as farmer and farm manager participants. Supporting could be achieved through off-farm work, bookkeeping or alternatively being a driving force by supporting and encouraging other family members to succeed by having a positive attitude. Findings suggest that the supporter role means the woman brings new and innovative ideas to the farm business.

"I do a lot of the accountancy paperwork, [and] so my husband and I discuss the finances together and see if affordability would cause an issue when coming to a final decision." (P6)

"All of the [local] farms that are moving [forward] are the ones that have got strong women who are interested in the farm and continually driving from behind. I think that's where the woman makes it a team." (P7)

Comparing with Gasson's (1980) three role types, supporting farm accounting and paperwork historically was seen as a role of a 'farmer's wife,' but four decades later, Smith et al. (2020: 9) suggests the supportive nature of being a 'farmer's wife' allows the husband to undertake farm work, through the woman 'doing necessary logistical, organisational and office work'. The respondents articulated notions of the farmer and wife as a team (Gasson, 1980); and providing mutual emotional support (Pini, 2005). Similarly, the extended family surrounding females in the farm business plays an important role in developing women in the industry. Respondents highlight the importance of inclusive, encouraging and supporting females in a community and/or family environment as being crucial to personal and business success.

"In rural communities, there is still a 'village' feeling and there is a lot of support across generations, even if there is not necessarily any relation between the women." (P5)

"In a family business with women, there is a real social fabric of networks supporting each other and it's really important." (P6)

The local agriculture and rural community can also impact a woman's experience, which in turn will affect her level of presence in the industry.

"I've only ever really had positive comments from people when I've said I work in agriculture." (P8)

Gasson (1980: 166) recognised the contribution that women make through the provision of support 'to maintain the stability and enhance the quality of life' of other men and women's lives within their local rural community. The literature highlights that in some remote UK locations, a lack of support can cause deterioration in the quality of life. Women are more likely to contribute their attention to the community due to a perceived natural instinct to nurture (Morris and Evans, 2001). Trauger (2004: 301) found that many US female farmers believed they would not be able to farm without community support so 'public spaces of recognition and support are crucial not only for women to maintain their identities as farmers, but also for legitimating and valuing the work of women farmers and providing a space of public representation and resistance to traditional constructions of farm women femininity.'

Therefore, the role of a woman as a supporter is vital for other females. Recent developments in social media have also helped to support women in the wider UK farm business community and further increase the concept of women supporting each other on a national level.

"The support online nowadays is incredible and for women to have that network and be able to interact with people of similar backgrounds to them really encourages them to continue their work in the industry." (P6)

"There are so many female role models to follow on social media who are showing everything good about British agriculture. It's so positive and the best way of linking everyone together; it's just amazing." (P7)

There is little investigation into the impacts of social media on UK female farmers, however, Daigle and Heiss (2021) found in the United States that the power of social media improves information accessibility, improves problem-solving on farm and the development of effective marketing strategies. Social gratification was created through social media platforms via 'exchange of emotional support among farmers... [by] sharing celebration, sharing struggles or sharing the commonality of being a woman farmer' (Daigle and Heiss, 2021: 15). This network of people connecting provides a sense of motivation for

individual women farmers, and a woman's involvement in supporting other women on social media is important for the national agriculture community, promoting positivity throughout the industry, which in turn is reflected into individual farm businesses.

### *The mother*

One female family farming role characteristic in particular emerges from the literature and the interviews, that of the mother. The role of farmer's mother exerts influence on other family members, including as a mentor and advisor, especially to the other women in her extended family (Smith et al., 2020). A common issue highlighted by many interviewees was their role within the family as a mother, birthing and caring for children. The older participants (P3, P4, P5, P6 and P7) have experienced being the main caregiving parent in the family whilst the husband continues to work on the farm.

"I made the difficult decision to stop working off-farm to look after the children and lose the additional household income. This [childcare] became my main responsibility." (P6)

Being female means becoming pregnant if the couple wishes to have a family, so the woman has no choice but to take a break from her career progression to support the maternity, birthing and initial childcare processes. Gasson (1980: 166) states that the 'role of [women] in producing and rearing successors, and in socialising them to accept that role, is crucial to the survival of most family farming businesses'. Two decades ago, Morris and Evans (2001) highlighted the lack of recognition and celebration of women as the mother whilst still continuing to carry out duties. However, it is difficult for a woman to fully undertake the prime caregiver role whilst fulfilling other role characteristics identified in this study, for example, an entrepreneur, off-farm careerist or labourer.

"Women are expected to take a break from their careers to have children, and because of this, I believe women are overlooked in the industry." (P1)

"Farming is not part-time in any shape or form and it's very difficult to maintain a high business level when you're female and trying to bring up a family because it's not easy." (P4)

All these factors highlight the issue of being a woman in a hardworking and physically demanding 24/7 working environment. It makes women dependent on others during motherhood, for either the support with childcare, in the workplace, or both. The interviews highlight a woman's reluctance to ask for assistance on

the working farm, but due to the demands of the work and the demands of being a mother not corresponding, they often had no choice. The size of the family and the stage of the family lifecycle will both influence the extent of a woman's role as a mother (Gasson, 1980), so a woman with more children and of a younger age will have a more saturated motherly role with respect to time, commitment and emotions, in comparison to a woman with fewer children who are older and independent.

This research finds that the older participants have experienced the former, more concentrated mother role and now that the children have grown and have gained more independence, they have more time to focus on the work of the farm business, entrepreneurial activity or off-farm careers. However, caring for younger or older generations tend to be allocated via 'a "natural" distribution of work on the basis of certain gender specific attributes' (Brandth, 2002: 184).

### *Labourer*

The final role characteristic that emerges is the labourer. The role of a labourer in the farm business is one that most of the participants highlighted, whether it be a full-time, part-time, permanent or temporary role. There are many aspects involved with being a woman as a labourer in the farm business. First, their capability and passion to work hard and to a high standard are prominent throughout the interviews.

"I'm a workaholic. I work seven days a week: but that's just farming. And I love what I do." (P7)

"I do all of the labour: the pruning, the tractor-driving and the spraying." (P8)

The labourer role interrelates with notions of the contribution that women provide to the farm household income. Most participants who could comment on their economic status stated that their financial contribution was equal to their male partner. One farm manager participant explained that she contributes two-thirds with her husband contributing the remaining third of the financial contribution from his separate business. It should be noted that the traditional perception of working farm women can still influence the way that they work. The study found that women, particularly younger participants (P1, P2 and P8), believe that they need to prove themselves in terms of labour because of the traditional stereotype perception of women by older male farmers.

"It's wrong to think that women can physically do the same things as men because we are built different... I feel I have to prove myself more than the men, so I always put extra effort in and work harder" (P1)



“There’s always that classic older generation view of girls in agriculture that we’re not as strong or intelligent as men.” (P2)

Although there is an agreement between participants regarding negative perceptions and the need to ‘prove oneself’, younger participants assume this is the same for all female farmers.

“To begin with there may be hesitancy with regards to females in agribusiness, but if they prove themselves, then that soon goes away.” (P4)

Tara-Satyavathi et al., (2010) compare work ethics between males and females stating that women work harder on more tasks and for longer hours. Findings on emotional strength were, with participants who note that their motherly traits were beneficial for caring for livestock and crops, concurring with Morris and Evans (2001).

“We have a female touch when it comes to handling livestock. You’ve got to be quieter, gentler and understand things, which I think women are better at because they’ve got the patience for it, and men don’t have that much patience.” (P2)

“Women have an advantage because we’re often seen to have better husbandry skills for looking after plants and animals.” (P8)

Translating this into a woman’s role with respect to their involvement in particular areas of farm business, the research finds that certain sectors of the agricultural industry embrace and empower women more than others due to the nature of such businesses.

“Machinery and arable... [has] always been a man’s job... but if you look at livestock-based areas, you have got more females.” (P2)

“Entry into arable farms and the red meat sector, where they are not family businesses and have a masculine culture, is a challenge. It’s hard for women to get into these sectors, not impossible, but you have to be resilient... Horticulture, poultry and pigs have a strong presence of women” (P5)

Smith et al. (2020) recognises the higher number of women connected to agri-industries, such as equestrian, horticulture and dairy, rather than in those perceived to have a more masculine culture, such as arable and red meat, with the focus on men and machinery being described as the ‘tractor-gene’ (Heggem, 2014). Perceptions of limited labour skills can damage women’s reputation, confidence, involvement and ability to work hard and means they constantly need to justify their credentials. Mechanisation,

advancements in technology and machinery for physically demanding day-to-day operations means that women can carry out the same tasks as men.

“Now, women are active and involved on the farm...I think mechanisation has reduced the differences between men and women.” (P5)

“Because of modern farming, you don’t have to be as physical because so much of it now is equipment.” (P7)

In summary, the five role characteristics that emerge from the primary research underline the augmented and diversified roles of women in farm businesses. This research positions that role descriptions alone, for example, farmer, farm manager, etc., do not fully capture the multifaceted contributions of women within the farm business and the plurality of contributions (Brasier et al., 2014). Additionally, this research underlines the key role characteristic of women as mothers, emphasising the multi-dimensional contributions of women to the farm business, and farm household. Rather than defining job roles within the farm, this research shows the nature of multifaceted contributions that are invisible if farm businesses are characterised solely in a hierarchical job description approach.

## Conclusion

Our research study investigates the role and contribution of women in UK farm businesses adopting a qualitative semi-structured methodology. This research expands debates within a growing body of research on rural women entrepreneurs (Becot et al., 2015; Elkafrawi and Refai, 2022) which discusses empowerment and roles of women in entrepreneurship. Whilst previous studies on this topic have primarily examined the job role of women in farm businesses (Dunne et al., 2021; Gasson, 1980, 1992; Shortall and Kelly, 2002; Smith et al., 2021), this research explores the roles women play in the farm business; the extent that women contribute to the farm business through these roles or characteristics of roles; the woman’s contribution to decision-making in farming businesses and the perceptions of women themselves of their roles in the agribusiness industry. This socially embedded nature of family and business has been identified in other studies (Salder, 2022; Stirzaker et al., 2022). Based on the findings of this research, we argue that previous literatures’ portrayal of the role of women (notably Brasier et al., 2014; Gasson, 1980) in agricultural businesses is outdated, as the role of women in agriculture has evolved to one which is of multi-skilled/multi-characterisation. Therefore, this research establishes a new conceptualisation of the roles and contributions of women to farm businesses, defined as an entrepreneur, decision-maker, supporter, mother and

labourer. The way in which a woman performs these role characterisations will vary as farm businesses demonstrate wide heterogeneity and the role characteristics for an individual can change over a woman's working and personal life.

This research suggests that a woman's status, involvement and decision-making participation levels within the farm business are highly dependent on their family and business-related role. Within the study population, tactical day-to-day decisions are made by those who identified as farmers, farm managers and entrepreneurs of diversified businesses, whether they are male or female. The farm managers may also delegate operational decision-making to an employee if they have several staff. With long-term financial decisions, female farm managers and entrepreneurs had most control, often with input from their significant male counterparts. Off-farm income careerists tended to be involved in decision-making through discussions, but not necessarily in the final decisions. For the farmer who works on her family farm business, she is involved in decision-making more than the farmer who works for a larger commercial farm business. Therefore, it should be noted that the type of farming/agribusiness can also affect a woman's status and decision-making involvement. In addition, the off-farm income careerist often takes on the role of administration and office activities and so their association with large financial decisions is still valuable (Brasier et al., 2014).

The interviews identify that there is a variation in industry perceptions of women in farming/agri-businesses. Most of the participants receive positive feedback from the external community, with some experiencing praise for their efforts. However, participants have also experienced negative remarks and behaviour including actions presenting concern over a woman's capability and their physicality. These perceptions if they extend to bias may be barriers to entry for women in the sector. Despite this, the barriers that currently exist are beginning to be broken down as evidenced by the participants. Whilst the study provides evidence on the role and contribution of women on UK farm businesses, the findings allow for further exploration. The exploratory nature of this research has limitations in its scope, and future research should look to expand on these findings on a larger scale and in different contexts.

The work informs both industry and policy of the multifaceted contribution of women on farms, notably in the context of the UK, where this research was conducted. For those who contribute financially through off-farm income, this income stream provides stability and security to a potentially sporadic and fluctuating farm business income. For policymakers, consideration must be given to increasing the number of female farmers, and the increased, evolving and fluid role characteristics for women working in agricultural businesses. As such, policies should consider farm household structure and dynamics in a more holistic

approach where previously they have focused mainly on the principal farmer.


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### ORCID iD

Wyn Morris  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4355-2211>

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