

GENDER IDENTITIES AND FARM SURVIVAL: WOMEN'S ACTIVITIES IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN REMOTE RURAL AREAS

REZA KHOSROBEIGI BOZCHELOUIE¹

ABSTRACT *Despite the structurally deterministic leanings of the literature about women and farms over time, new studies have attempted to identify the ways in which women's positions in the rural household are reinforced, stressing the factor of visibility in the labor force. The entrepreneurial processes and commodification practices through which women engage in a range of different kinds of productive activity, such as agrotourism and the production of organic crops, are frequently cited as sources of empowerment for women on farms . However, since this new trend is not a unitary and homogeneous process, the present study examines the role of women in agriculture by taking into account the positionality of the specific actors, as well as their conflicts and negotiations within particular sociocultural contexts. Our analysis is based on sets of in-depth interviews with full-time farm women in Jirestan, north-eastern Iran. Findings indicate that Jirestan's women identify themselves both as "producers" and "entrepreneurs." Commercial gardens, in addition to new farming styles and the reproduction of sales of traditional local produce, have created this "hybrid" identity. Although farms are being re-constructed as shared businesses with an increase in the role of women, the latter still adhere to patriarchal traditions and social norms and consider themselves helpers and housewives.*

KEYWORDS: *women's roles, entrepreneur, producer, agricultural sector, Jirestan.*

¹ Reza Khosrobeigi Bozchelouie is assistant professor of geography and rural planning, Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran; email: r.khosrobeigi@hsu.ac.ir

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, many pieces of research have highlighted the key role of women in the agricultural sector (Bock 1994; Ventura 1994; Whatmore 1991), identifying them as “farmers” (not housewives, or farmers’ wives) (Little and Panelli 2003). Before this time, rural women were considered in different policy arenas to be members of a vulnerable and marginal social group (Little 2009; ONS 2003). With the social and economic reforms of rural areas – especially in western and European societies – the role of women has expanded in the agricultural sector with the aim of diversifying and increasing on- and off-farm production (Clark 2009; Meerburg et al. 2009). Consequently, many entrepreneurship-related innovations have appeared in the rural economy (Rubin and Manfre 2014). In other words, economic and social changes in rural areas have been followed by the active presence of women in the agricultural sector, and farming families have turned to exploiting diverse and multifunctional sources of income. Rural women have created small businesses on their household farms, including agrotourism activities (Flangian et al. 2014), the processing of traditional foods and agricultural products (Anthopoulou 2010). Certainly, the small businesses of rural women are creating products with specific qualities; such products typically preserve their geographical origin and are traditional, organic, and natural (Marsden 1998; Sylvander 1994). With the trend for people, especially urban residents, to consume more rural and traditional foods, production for the market is being substituted by production for the nearest place (direct marketing). In fact, the distance of farms from market is declining and local demand for rural products is increasing (Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000). Therefore, many pieces of research have been created around ecofeminism and environmental issues in which the relationship of women with the environment and nature is investigated (Bryant and Pini 2006). However, the diversification and multifunctional economic activities of rural families are not limited to the role of women on farms; they can also include the role of women outside farms and households (Markantoni 2012).

In recent years, the rural areas of Jirestan (one of the districts in Shirvan County, North Khorasan Province) have changed extensively, and the role of women in the agricultural sector has become more widespread and dominant. The presence of Jirestan’s women in leading roles is linked in the first instance to the absence of males on the farm. As men move out of family farming in countries in the Middle East and North Africa, women tend to stay, or move out of the sector a lot more slowly (Lastarria-Cornhiel 2008). The assumption of a leading role for woman in these cases does not often entail their exercise of managerial duties, but corresponds to a kind of lending of their name to the

husband, son or father, who are the de facto heads of the farm or co-managers. Moreover, the increase in the number of Jirestan's women in leading roles can often be observed on small-scale, part-time farms, either because the demands of managerial work are slighter in the former, or, more usually, because men have more frequent recourse to non-farm employment than woman. The phenomenon is referred to as the feminization of part-time farming (Sachs and Alston 2010). The persistence of small and very small family farm holdings in Jirestan and the relative sparseness of agricultural resources because of the mountainous region induced Jirestan's farmers from a very early date to look for additional ways to earn money, both within farming and outside of it. However, it is now expected that Jirestan's women seek extra sources of income by diversifying their on- and off farm production with an emphasis on local traditions and heritage.

Overall, part-time farming encompasses a plurality of activities that challenge the simplistic approach to this concept. Since diversification is not a unitary nor a homogeneous process, it cannot be interpreted without accounting for agency, conflict, and negotiation within particular sociocultural contexts (Galani-Moutafi 2013). Discussion of the various forms of diversification and sources of additional income unravels sociocultural and spatial complexities in agriculture and rural life at the intersection of the local and global. Nevertheless, most of the empirical studies that underpin post-productivism and multifunctionality contributions have generally focused on individual women's niche initiatives (for instance, the development of quality products, or agrotourism). Studies have additionally identified the purpose of these diverse forms of work as being the stabilisation and increase of low and variable agricultural incomes. Of course, besides this, other factors such as the characteristics of local and regional labor markets, land markets, and the type of production orientation and level of mechanization are also referred to. This focus has potentially resulted in neglect of the key explanatory elements of the internal dynamics of agriculture. Additionally, some academics have expressed doubt about the expansion of innovative activities in Iran, and particularly Jirestan. It is also clear that farm women are not a homogeneous group. Nevertheless, many studies have attempted to homogenize the various typologies of women's roles and the concept of the feminization of agriculture by referring to three main roles: "*substitution* (women taking over activities because economic development allows men to disdain them); *integration* (where women do work ostensibly considered traditional for their sex), and *competition* (where women vie with men for equal employment opportunities and in all aspects of social and political life)" (Byrne et al. 2014).

In this article, the intent is to describe the difficulty the farm population has had in shaping its identity and its image with respect to the rest of society.

Bourdieu (1977: 3) famously stated that the farm population can be thought of as an “objectified social class,” and “a social class dispossessed of its power to define its own identity.” However, the role of women in agriculture cannot be analyzed without accounting for the positionality of the specific actors, as well as their practices and experiences. I seek here to explore the extent to which farmers can impact public perceptions of rural life and agriculture. The following research questions are posed: What kinds of roles do women consider undertaking in farming, and is their self-perception compatible with these new styles of farming?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature review on women in the agricultural sector

Recent research about the role of women in the agricultural sector has focused on the social inequalities associated with the gender-based division of labor in rural areas and the marginalization of women (Bryant and Pini 2009: 48). In other words, agricultural history is perceived as a masculine and patriarchal process without any place for women (Brandth 2002). The accepted gender pattern is a patrilineal one in which the son has the right to substitute the father and continue his agricultural occupation. This is one of the processes which contribute to social inequity and make the role of women in the agricultural sector invisible (Sachs, 1983). However, women play a complementary role in the agricultural sector and should learn to consider themselves as auxiliary workers, not farmers (Brandth 2002). Wahtmore (1991) puts forward a combination of political and feminist viewpoints to claim that the wageless role of women in household farms is a form of support for the economy of the family. It has been said that women can only enter the agricultural sector by marrying a farmer and thereby obtaining a complementary role in earning family income (Shortall 2001). But, in reality, women are “only farmers’ wives” and are often considered to be assistants (Bryant 1999), while the main management roles of the farm are in the hands of men. These kinds of stereotypes have emerged from the social conformity of rural women and their marginal roles as wives and housewives (Little and Panelli 2003). Another justification for the marginal role of women in the agricultural sector is a biological claim regarding their bodies and lesser physical strength (Trauger et al. 2008). Agriculture-related discourse is threaded through with patriarchal perspectives about women’s bodies (Brandth 2006). According to Brandth (2006), farm work is defined by physical activity

and requires bodily strength. Therefore, physical activity in the agricultural sector is totally symbolized by men's bodies, both physically and symbolically. Since women's bodies lack masculine characteristics and are believed to be less suitable for work in the agricultural sector, they are only given part-time duties and thus work less than men (Saugeres 2002). Much research which has been carried out on the role of patriarchal hegemony in the agricultural sector has highlighted the relationship between the physical body (physical strength) and brevity, courage, fearlessness, strength, physical readiness, and the ability to withstand hard work (Leipins 2000). Saugress (2002) and also Bryant and Pini (2006) report that the aim of using machinery and agricultural technology is to remove women from the agricultural sector through patriarchal ideology. For instance, the former authors claim that "a tractor is a symbol of men's power and a means of dominating women." Moreover, agricultural education is strongly patriarchal and rarely leads to improvements in the education of rural women (Kloppenburg 1991). It is not an exaggeration to say that gender studies have expanded widely into the field of rural agriculture both theoretically and experimentally (Little 2002; Little 2009). Although patriarchy is a fixed concept in most of this research, the role of women as an emerging factor due to the commercialization of informal (traditional) occupations and their presence in the agricultural sector as suppliers of household economic needs (Bock, 1994) is becoming widespread. Studies are emerging in the field of new agriculture which suggest that women are engaging in a wide range of activities, such as agrotourism, the direct marketing of products and local sales, the production of high quality products which are environmentally friendly, and the creation of new job opportunities on farms based on local culture and tradition. Moreover, some new activities are being defined in relation to agricultural reforms and the transition from productivity to post-productivity. These activities focus on substituting production with intensive farming (decreasing dependency on agriculture by new entrepreneurs), an emphasis on environmental protection, and support for the vitality of villages and rural areas (Kazakopoulos and Gidarakou 2003). This shift can increase the presence of women in the agricultural sector by strengthening them and transforming their marginal and subordinate roles into managerial ones, and by strengthening their organizational status associated with public decision making (cooperatives, etc.) (Ibid, 401). This can simultaneously challenge the patriarchal and masculine rule of men. According to Saugeres (2002), the diversity of emerging activities for women may challenge the masculine role of men regarding their use of agricultural machinery and technology, especially the heavy machinery which is used for mass production, farm asset control, strength, tolerance of hard work, pride and enjoyment from their presence on farms. On the other hand, the necessity of changing training

models, agricultural education, and of improving women's knowledge to make it consistent with the new agricultural structure and the establishment of new economies in rural areas should be taken into consideration (Trauger 2004).

Consequently, gender gaps are fading away in Jirestan district and women are becoming increasingly involved in the agricultural sector so that most of the responsibilities traditionally dedicated to women and men do not come into play, except in some cases. The recession that occurred in the agricultural sector and the related reduction in income as a result of liberalization and deregulation, as well as climate change, has impelled Jirestan's women to find sources of additional income. On-farm employment has thus become more common among women, thereby contributing to the survival of farms. In other words, the recombination of existing resources (more than the incorporation of new and different sources) has occurred. It appears that Jirestan's women have become more orientated towards familiar forms of occupational activity such as the creation of organic, artisanal, "natural," farm-processed products that are related to their nomadic² past. In short, women are registering as important local actors in the conservation of cultural heritage and in the transformation of local resources into marketable commodities through rural tourism and local retail trade. Additionally, for Jirestan's women it is important to maintain the integrity of the land, the pasture, and the home and its related activities in the style of the past, as was common to the nomadic family. However, the related incomes are regarded as contributions rather than independent incomes. Such survival strategies in declining rural communities are often chosen because they are socially and culturally acceptable, rather than economically optimal. Adherence to patriarchal norms is widespread among Jirestan's women. This means that, although the rural economy is becoming more women-centered, the tendency toward subordination to men and conformance with their commands continues to occur in the agricultural sector. These findings indicate that farm resilience needs to be understood in the context of gender. Accepting the implications of this argument, we focus in the present paper on the motives and aspirations of rural women, as well as on their role on farms. The following research question is now addressed: To what extent is the presence of Jirestan's women in agriculture related to different representations of rurality?

2 Nomadism is a lifestyle adapted to infertile regions such as steppe, tundra, or ice and sand, where mobility is the most efficient strategy for exploiting scarce resources. One of the most important elements in nomadic life is family production. Creating products, whether for sale or for the domestic consumption of the family, involves the work and collaboration of all members of the family. The economy of nomadic families is based on shared emotional, social and economic relations (material and spiritual) and a sense of responsibility towards each other is directed towards men.

Theories of Identity

Identity is a part of self-concept and an answer to the question “Who am I?” (Augoustinos and Walker 1995). Rose (1995) defines identity as our understanding and perception of ourselves. This includes all the daily experiences and mental feelings related to the consciousness of life. Since life is always going on and we encounter various and unpredictable experiences, identity cannot be fixed and unchangeable, and new mental definitions of daily activities arise (Leyshon 2008). Many hypotheses have been presented in this regard, based on different fields of study. Stets and Burke (2003) have described two main sociological theories about identity, self-categorization and identification. The basis of self-categorization is paying attention to the different dimensions of identity which result from group membership. In fact, society consists of individuals who have relations with each other based on their power; the structure of these relationships are of significance in the formation of identity. People try to compare their own group with other groups in order to prove their superiority; this is called inter-group comparison. This process by which people separate the members of their own group from the members of other groups is referred to as social self-categorization (Stets and Burke 2000). There exist different self-categorizations about the role of women in the agricultural sector which can be differentiated as women as producers and women as entrepreneurs: also, as farmers’ wives, assistants, and helpers. In terms of identification (which is a guide to identity decoding in this paper), the individual does not engage in self-categorization on the basis of specific groups, but considers their own specific role in a group or social structure (Vesala and Vesala 2010). Importantly, when farm women’s agency is discussed, content has centred on the economic and emotional impact of on-off farm work. According to this idea, changes in the roles and abilities of women occur, but women tend to protect male farmers’ identity, allowing “the family farm discourse to persist,” and raising questions about the costs which arise for farm women’s identities. Joint Farming Ventures (JFVs) are a business model which refers to two or more farmers involved in a farm business without necessarily co-owning the land on which the business is operated (Macken-Walsh and Roche 2012).

DATA AND METHODS

A qualitative method was used in this study, along with content analysis (Neuman 2011), to identify the life experiences of rural women and present a real and deep understanding of the meaning of these experiences (Gilbert 2001). The participants are rural women who work full-time on farms. The main criteria for inclusion in the study was the migration of the head of the household to the city (seeking a better occupation and higher income), and, more importantly, the commercial function of the related agricultural practices, and production for market. A purposeful sampling method was used (initially including 30 women). To access participants more rapidly, a snowball sampling method was used simultaneously (Patton 2002). Brewer et al. (2002) consider 20-30 participants and Holloway and Galvin (2006) 40-45 participants to be sufficient for the identification of a coherent set of specified items. The sampling process was continued until data saturation. Finally, 57 participants were selected based on the demands of the qualitative method and data saturation.

The present study was carried out in Jirestan, one of the districts of Shirvan County in North Khorasan Province. This district is located in the Kopet Dag mountain range on the frontier of Turkmenistan and Iran. According to the 2011 census, the population was 5166 in 17 rural settlements of Jirestan. Most of the rural settlements have more than 20 families. Agriculture is practiced only on a small scale and in smallholdings due to climate change, the mountainous conditions, and a land slope greater than 20%. Most production is related to herding, transhumance of livestock, nomadic cattle grazing on pastures (according to the nomadic background of the local residents) or is limited to the surroundings of settlements. However, agriculture, gardening, and pastoralism have become the main economic pillars of Jirestan. In the 2014 agricultural census, 3306 people were employed in the agricultural sector. Since women were not included in this census, there are no accurate or reliable statistics about the number of men and women employed in the sector.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used for data collection (Flick 2009). According to the mood of participants, the interviews lasted 20-40 minutes. The structure of the interviews took the form of the following questions: 1) Do you consider yourself or your husband to be responsible for agricultural affairs? 2) Is your presence on the farm due to the aim of achieving income independence, or helping support your family? 3) From your perspective, has agriculture changed since the time when men were primarily responsible? 4) Does agriculture generate a good income and solve your family's problems? 5) Do you think agriculture meets the needs of townspeople and tourists, or do you produce only for the market?

Figure 1 Location of case study in Shirvan County



Source: Author

Interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word with the permission of participants. After the transcription of interviews and their accurate analysis the researcher examined their internal and external elements. Each interview was listened to several times to obtain a deeper understanding of participants. After frequent replays, semantic units and main messages were identified. Different parts of the text were summarized and coded using qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA). Codes were compared regarding similarities and differences, then categories and sub-categories were formed based on theme congruence.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Split between Culture and Land Use (Pasture and Agriculture)

The common characteristic of Jirestan's rural areas is their "gender rurality," according to which women live in rural environment yet have economic and social responsibilities, while men leave their rural lives (permanently or seasonally) to live in cities. However, this practice takes different shapes and

forms according to local and social characteristics and causes some dissociation. Among these, the paradigm of leaving/staying, and interfering/not interfering can be identified. Changes in the agricultural professions of Jirestan's women are considered to be the embodiment of a disorderly and critical situation which is the culmination of a specific time and local identity. Therefore, social changes in rurality force people to leave their herding and transhumance professions, along with their agricultural traditions. The narratives obtained from interviews indicate the formerly strong emphasis on handling domestic affairs, the production of specific livestock and crops, the interactions and division of labor between men and women and children, and everyone's active participation in rural economic affairs. Jirestan's women claimed that:

"In the past, agriculture was traditional and the level of production was so low...families were self-reliant...women did not interfere in agricultural affairs, and only handled household affairs and protected and raised their children... however, now they are mostly seen on agricultural farms...since the needs of rural people have changed through time and the cost of living has risen, therefore, we need to go to the farms" (Code 1-1/Interview: 4/47 year old/Alkhas).

"We have been nomads and pastoral people for many years...although the number of livestock has declined significantly, but in the past engagement in agriculture was aimed at providing for household needs and livestock food (such as wheat, barley, peas, and lentils)...everything has changed...commercial gardening has become more widespread (such as raising peaches)... sales are only for the sake of the market" (Code 1-2/Interview: 2/42 year old/Kuseh).

"In the past, we never used chemical fertilizers and poisons on our products...pestilence was so rare, and products were not corrupted or wasted...but in the meantime, money has become everything, and people are in agriculture for the sake of the money" (Code 1-3/ Interview: 3/52 year old/Kalateh-ye Nazar Mohammad).

"In the past, children helped us with pastoralism and agricultural affairs...but now they are in the cities, they do not like to live in countryside and help us like in those times...a lack of facilities has robbed them of such kinds of motivation" (Code 1-4/ Interview: 1/38 year old/Takht).

These narratives indicate that identity and production have become divorced from moral and cultural values (Paniagua 2014). Jirestan's men and women have changed their economic relations due to the migration of their sons to cities, and are less engaged in herding and the pastoral life, leading to the displacement of farms and pastoralism-related products. With the permanent out-migration of youth to cities seeking educational opportunities, herding and transhumance activities have reduced the number of livestock in rural settlements. Therefore, rural people have been forced to integrate their livestock into one herd and to hire shepherds. In other cases they have sold their livestock and started keeping livestock (such as cows) and engaging in animal husbandry. As a consequence, the traditional heads of families who worked on farms and gardens have gradually handed over the responsibilities of this sector to women, and started to graze cattle in pastures, as previously done by the sons of the family. However, the heads of families have been forced to leave even this profession and migrate to cities.

The transition of farm management from men to women cannot be considered typical of the transition to market production, since this responsibility is associated with some concerns and problems. In fact, the motivations of settlers were not limited to economic issues and included some consideration for earlier forms of production. Emotional needs mean that people desire to keep their connection to the land (pastures and agriculture) and family members (nostalgia and the sense of belonging to a place). This is possible through maintaining a presence on farms, creating agricultural products, and handling household affairs. Although in many studies the role of women has been considered to be derived from their need for extra income from entrepreneurial initiatives as the only logical option, women also want to play a specific role that meets some of their daily expectations, which are not only economic. While the Local Community Paradigm challenges this fact (Barth 1966: 36), it is believed that the drivers of farmers' activity concern more than mere economic matters. The real desire of women who are present in the agricultural sector is for symbolic integrity with men, children, and households, rather than for extra income and engagement in entrepreneurial initiatives. Therefore, the attachment of women to land and work can take the form of a simple tribute to their husbands and children in difficult economic times, along with a sense of ethical responsibility regarding the need to preserve businesses.

Alternative visions of self and rurality

Jirestan's women who have been influenced by the processes of glocalization have integrated their agricultural pursuits with agrotourism, involving representations of heritage and culture at permanent or seasonal sites and production and sale of their wares. They have seen change, both personal and in the community, as an opportunity either to exploit endogenous resources or to embed and adjust their entrepreneurial practices to a new framework. Jirestan's women have exploited opportunities for socioeconomic management in ways that rely on the coherence of family members and the integrity of the farm, pasture and home, while culturalizing the economy in the context of tourism. In leaving behind their daily routines and taking up agricultural responsibility, they have become aware of themselves and their relationships as nomadic families. The economy of such families is based on a complex arrangement of shared emotional, social and economic relations (material and spiritual), while a sense of responsibility towards men also exists. In Jirestan, the revivification of Joint Farming as a business model for family farms has improved the economic resilience of farm households and reduced social isolation in rural areas. While everyday changes in agriculture have contributed to the gap in households, women's work has played an important role in preserving communal life and patriarchal traditions. As one woman explained:

“Although my husband has migrated to the city, he is still is the main manager of agricultural affairs...I assist him in all these affairs... however, the children help us a lot when they are in the village... This means that the solidarity of the family comes from the nomadic background of the village” (Code 2-1/Interview: 2/60 year old/ Kaltamanlu).

“It does not matter who is responsible...we should do everything together...because it is not possible to do all the work alone...all the family members should collaborate” (Code 2-2/Interview: 1/57 year old/Malvanlu).

Besides considerations related to commercial value, women believe in increasing the amount of products made in Jirestan in order earn money that is a resource for supporting local retail trade and agrotourism businesses. Furthermore, in addition to focusing on traditional products, reference is often made to geographical origin or the virtue of quality and health, with a focus on meeting the socially constructed perceptions of consumers embedded in

the trend towards new consumption frameworks in the context of the local-global nexus. But respondents also claimed that these incomes are regarded as contributions rather than independent incomes. As one woman explained:

“Surely I work in the agricultural sector in order to help my family and protect my children...my husband cannot provide for me and my children in this difficult economic situation ...it is my duty to help him and lessen the burden of responsibility for him” (Code 2-3/Interview: 3/44 year old/Malvanlu).

“In mutual married life, financial independence is meaningless...all of the family members should collaborate to improve the quality of life...I would not leave my husband and my children alone...if I have savings, I will spend them for my family in times of need” (Code 2-4/Interview: 2/Palkanlu-ye Pain).

These statements indicate that rural women are using economic and social opportunities and creating a web of social capital in connection with land and family members; however, the agricultural economy is still associated with local culture. Although the narratives show no contradictions or tension, an internal reading suggests resistance against the predominant social order and reflects the creation of a real and alternative space. These alternatives – apart from representing the ideology and rationalization of this changed space – reflect some worries about the future relations of men and women, and even their children, which will affect agriculture, pastoralism, household affairs, and people’s roles more generally.

Overall, Jirestan’s women’s re-evaluation of the rural is based on criteria related to the integration of activities and joint economics and the revitalization of the rural as a central framework of reference for their local retail trade and agrotourism businesses. In their discourse, one can locate the cultural texture of a type of rurality and a sense of identity rooted in and symbolized by the length of association with the specific locality which has been inscribed by work and the desire to improve livelihoods and families.

Production-Oriented Agriculture as Divergent from Entrepreneurial Activity

In Jirestan, small-farm-based businesses run by women have flowered in recent years. These include vegetable farming, and the creation of traditional

home-made products. Women have cultivated vegetables in commercial gardens that are supplied directly to customers in the form of fresh, high quality, healthy products. As one woman explained:

“Agriculture has not changed so much... Production for sale in the market continues... But besides conventional farming, we have cultivated vegetables... In general, the amount of cultivation and production in the village has increased due to the diversification of farming” (Code 3-2/Interview: 2/57 year old/Charmeh).

Further analysis of the findings about Jirestan’s women’s businesses indicates that women are choosing their own models for their business, which are still based on traditions of nomadic life and personal creativity. A lot of milk, yogurt, cheese, and cream are produced every day. Such products are also offered to local retail outlets and restaurants, in addition to tourists and for direct sale to households. As one woman explained:

“In addition to vegetables...we would like to have familiar forms of products like yogurt and butter at home ...while many advisers suggest that you can make new products like spreads, pickles, jams...I would say that this kind of production takes a lot of time and energy...Finding customers for them is hard...Customers demand our vegetables and dairy products more than other creations.” (Code 3-5/Interview: 1/52 year old/Kuseh).

“Since we are engaged in selling vegetables and processing livestock products... keeping livestock and working at home does not allow for other innovative activities...Additionally, we do not have the skills” (Code 3-7/Interview: 4/55 year old/ Palkanlu-ye Bala).

Women become active, in other words, in the areas where they are able to make use of tacit knowledge and know-how. Furthermore, the cultivation of vegetables and the processing of livestock products by women is also contributing to the sustainability of farms and the creation of financial resources for gardening and the survival of families. However, the multifunctional activities of Iranian farms, especially in Jirestan, are not new and are currently considered to be one of the main principles of rural life. Working agricultural land in Iran, and especially in the mountainous lands of Jirestan, involves small-scale activity that has not always met the needs of families. Therefore, new income sources have had to be found. One of our female respondents stated that :

“Agriculture brings a good income...but it is not sufficient for meeting the needs of a family...other activities should be done along with that... it was also so in the past...Of course, at the moment, this strategy is being implemented through new practices within a set of social and economic relations” (Code 3-8/Interview: 3/61 year old/Alkhas).

The conclusion is that, similar to the findings of Perkins (2006) and Woods (2010), the changed space of villages should not be considered equivalent to agricultural and production spaces. The reason is that we increasingly encounter the reform of economic structures, and production for market is being replaced by a processes of commodification involving new buyers (urban buyers), while entrepreneurial opportunities involve the spread of local production and greater value being placed on local food, natural scenery, and cultural values. New economic tendencies (tourism and leisure patterns) require a new definition of villages and rural areas, and Jirestan’s settlers, as will be explained, are seeking to reinvent and render services to tourists and visitors that involve the connection between culture and agriculture.

Traditional Production Methods

Jirestan’s women are applying their newly acquired skills and competencies and combining them with local traditions to produce and supply products to visitors and tourists, representing a different perspective on economics and rural life. The new styles of agriculture and home-based production could be seen as a form of nostalgia for a nomadic era, but the need for new social and symbolic realities which preserve the family and cultural and traditions is clear. Jirestan’s women consider themselves to be guardians of local traditions, even though they have discovered new means of producing and selling since they have become involved in these new economic and social spaces. They believe that:

“Most of the garden products like apples are sold unprocessed in the markets of big cities and do not need to be processed... But the vegetables and dairy products in Jirestan are of high value and as luxury products they have their own customers” (Code 4-1/Interview: 2/39 year old/Kaltamanlu).

This claim reminds us that in local production chemicals and pesticides are not used. Though women have taken responsibility for commercial gardens and

can certainly produce for market, their acceptance of this responsibility has not prevented them from engaging in entrepreneurial activities whereby they have acquired empirical mastery of the techniques of production, with the women themselves seeing themselves as organic producers (vegetables, cucumbers, tomatoes) or as parts of well-known (to them) family businesses they have inherited (producing cheese, yogurt, cream, whey, and animal-based oils). As one woman explained:

“Selling unprocessed garden products...provides us with an opportunity to work on the skills we have acquired” (Code 4-2/Interview: 3/58 year old/Kalateh-ye Nazar Mohammad).

The current perspectives of Jirestan’s women about locality – as a source of knowledge and rational encounters with living conditions – guides their interaction with agriculture and culture. In fact, the role of women in the agricultural sector is dependent on certain tasks and perceptions about ones they were previously engaged in. The role of women in Jirestan involves a combination of different tasks and is founded on the belief that women should not merely focus their energy in one direction but should engage in multiple tasks simultaneously. One of the respondents stated that:

“We are simultaneously producers (active in commercial gardens and producing for the market) as well as entrepreneurs (producing vegetables and dairy products for direct supply to visitors and tourists at the farm or through retail) ...Work at the farm and at home, as well as production for the market meets the demand of urban customers for agricultural and home-made products and is characteristic of the women in this region” (Code 4-3/Interview: 1/50 year old/Milanlu Solfa).

In this way, women are engaging in a unique synthesis of techniques that include working with (agri) culture and nature.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research has shown the importance of the cultural and social aspects involved in women’s participation in agriculture. Beyond the factors of the agricultural recession, the out-migration of men, climate change and livestock

decline, the motivation of women is mainly based on the cultural and traditional character of nomadic life and a desire to symbolically integrate agriculture, pasture and home, as well as adherence to patriarchal constructions, which is recognized as an element which in some cases distinguishes people rooted in the locality from outsiders. Jirestan's women identify themselves both as "producers" and "entrepreneurs": commercial gardens, besides new farming styles and traditional local produce, have created this "hybrid" identity. This means that farmers are not experiencing entrepreneurship as something distant from themselves and as not fitting into their world of ideas. They are committed to engaging in agricultural production based on earlier practices when men were present in rural areas. The emergence of new forms of symbolic production, however, may be considered the basis for maintaining conventional farming. Nevertheless, Jirestan's women are being turned into the living embodiments of collective natural and cultural histories, and in this way are creating value: mixing production, consumption and showcasing the special and intimate attachment they feel toward their land, families and rural area.

From the analysis of the research findings in this paper it is clear that the partnership model is increasingly being favoured, whereby two or more farmers operate a farm business jointly without necessarily co-owning the land on which the business is operated. Jirestan's women speak of the farms they work on as "our farms," recognizing them as collective enterprises. This infers the same work and collective effort and solidarity between family members as existed in their former roles as nomads in Jirestan. Women still adhere to patriarchal traditions and social norms and consider themselves as helpers and housewives. However, despite this traditional rural culture, imbued with patriarchal and patrilineal norms, Jirestan's women are persisting in their desire to become successful farmers. Production practices are changing women's economic status on family farms and raising their status as equals amongst farming men. Women want to be included in decision making and have an impact on their livelihoods, their workloads, and the future of their families and communities. But, as explained, although their presence on farms is regarded as contributory rather than empowering, it is transforming them from subordinated persons to co-managers or managers, and giving them financial independence.

In conclusion, the economic structure of farming and roles of farmers are changing. Currently, policymaking and ideas about production in universities and academic society underscore the importance of entrepreneurial agriculture for pioneering women. However, according to the present findings, rural women are following their economic interests rather responding to public policies. This paper is mostly concerned with ideas about the self-efficacy and self-confidence of women in support of an identity, and identifies the role of women

and production methods in the agricultural sector. Further studies should focus on interference between women's producer and entrepreneurial identities with general rural development and agricultural measures and policies, and the reaction of women and their family members towards this interference.

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