ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Organic Solutions? Gender and Organic Farming in the Age of Industrial Agriculture

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Introduction

The negative impacts of industrial agriculture on rural areas have been well documented. The loss of family farms, the exhaustion of soil, the pollution of groundwater and rivers, and the collapse of rural communities all attest to the effects of a global economy that values short-term profits over long-term environmental, social, and economic sustainability (Sumner 2005).

Organic agriculture evolved as a direct challenge to these negative trends, based on a philosophy that promotes a more holistic system that cares for soil, plants, animals, people, and communities. While this philosophy has been co-opted by large corporate actors only interested in the price premium associated with organic products, it nevertheless has inspired many people to take up, or convert to, organic farming.

Given such progressive philosophical underpinnings, how do women fare in organic agriculture? Are gender relations different than those in conventional agriculture? How do these relations, in turn, affect rural farming communities? After a brief overview of industrial agriculture and organic agriculture, this paper will explore gender issues with respect to organic agriculture by presenting an overview of existing studies in the field, plus observations based on recent primary research with organic farmers.

The Larger Context—Industrial Agriculture

Agriculture is a linked, dynamic social-ecological system based on the extraction of biological products and services from an ecosystem, innovated and managed by people (McIntyre, Herren, Wakhungu, and Watson 2009). Depending on the system chosen, agriculture has tremendous potential for harm or for good. The currently dominant system—industrial agriculture—carries enormous economic, social, and environmental costs, which make it fundamentally unsustainable (Barker 2002: 249-263; Kimbrell 2002; Albritton 2009; Elton 2010). In spite of these costs, industrial agriculture is being globalized through trade agreements, corporate lobbying, the so-called "Green Revolution," and the influence of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Industrial agriculture involves non-household-based production units, typically with absentee ownership and control over production factors (Lobao 2001). It is also large-scale, capital intensive and highly mechanized, dependant on extensive amounts of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, and highly concentrated livestock operations and/or monocropping. A creation of capitalism, industrial agriculture offers accumulation opportunities at every step in the food chain.

When discussing capital accumulation in American agriculture, Berlan describes how power farming—the use of glittering technologies such as tractors and trucks—began to make money, not subsistence, the driving force of farming:

> It replaced simple exchange with the more complex and contradictory capitalist circuit of money-commodity-money, which makes sense only if the amount of money at the end of the circuit is larger than the amount at the beginning—that is, accumulation then becomes the aim of production. (1989, 212.)

For Berlan (1989, 212), power farming simultaneously made capital accumulation necessary and possible: "necessary by subverting the previous simple exchange relationship into a capitalist relationship; possible by creating economies of scale."

In his recent study of how capitalism creates hunger and obesity, Albritton argues that capitalism has never effectively managed agriculture because its basic operating principles do not permit it to:

> The rational capitalist will always act to maximize short-term profits, but an agriculture organized in accord with such an imperative may be radically unjust and may undermine both human and environmental health. (Albritton 2009, 20)

Albritton's work carries forward the ideas of Marx, who recognized the inherent problem of capitalist agriculture well over a century ago:

> In dealing with the genesis of capitalist production I stated that it is founded on "the complete separation of the producer from the means of production"….and that "the basis of this whole development *is the expropriation of the agricultural producer*. To date this has not been accomplished in a radical fashion anywhere except in England... But *all the other countries of Western Europe* are undergoing the same process." (Emphasis in original; Marx 1881.)

The expropriation of the agricultural producer continues to this day, as evidenced by the decreasing number of family farms in both developed and developing countries. And as Shields reminds us: "As farms go, so go the communities." (Shields 2004.)

The development of industrial agriculture has not only separated many farmers from their land and undermined many rural communities, it has also marginalized women from agricultural processes. In her research on women in organic agriculture, McMahon reviews the work of feminist scholars who see modern globalized agriculture as a "classed, raced, and gendered project that produces inequality, hunger and environmental degradation (2002, 204)." Promoted as "feeding the world," this system of agriculture is increasingly framed as a "masculinist (and white) moral project" (2002, 205) that is ideologically in the service of international trade and hides the fact that globalized agri-food systems control much of the world's agriculture. As this control grows, McMahon argues, the roles of women in agriculture are being obscured, marginalized, or lost.

One response to the problems created by industrial agriculture has been the development of organic agriculture.

Organic Agriculture

Organic agriculture has been defined as

> a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with

> adverse effects. Organic Agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved. (IFOAM 2010a.)

Organic agriculture began as a social movement in Britain in 1926 (Conford 2001). Like many other movements of protection (Polanyi 2001), it arose as a reaction to the negative consequences of industrialization—in this case, the industrialization of agriculture. Organic pioneers like Sir Albert Howard, Lady Eve Balfour, and JI Rodale shared an ethic in which soil, crop, livestock, human and community health were all interconnected (Howard 1943). In this way, organic agriculture was not designed as a market niche or a business opportunity, but as a defense against increasing industrialization and a vision of a more sustainable way of life.

The organic pioneers espoused a set of values that promoted the health and welfare of people, animals, communities and the environment (Howard 1943). Unlike the industrial paradigm, which concentrates power and wealth, commodifies the environment, exploits labor, and undermines food security (DeLind 2000), the organic paradigm disperses power and wealth, works with the environment, treats labor fairly, and supports food security (IFOAM 2010b). As Fromartz (2006) noted, the attraction of organics was not nostalgia for a simpler time, but rather, a refusal to sacrifice all other values to the singular push for yield and profit.

Over time, however, the success of organic agriculture and the accompanying organic farming movement has drawn the attention of large corporate players. The organic price premium, combined with increasing consumer demand, has made organics ripe for capital accumulation backed by large-scale financing of organic mega-farms, attempts to water down organic standards, corporate buyouts of traditional organic food labels, and the development of in-house brands of organic products. In the process, "organic is becoming what we hoped it would be an alternative to" (Rigby and Bown 2007)—industrial agriculture that promotes yield and profit above all other values. By stripping the organic philosophy from the organic product, capitalist interests are replicating the cycle of externalized economic, social and environmental costs associated with industrial agriculture. In particular, "making organic 'corporate' runs the risk of making it part of the problem—the problem of disempowering the very people it seeks to work with (Farnworth and Hutchings 2009." According to Kuper:

> It seems likely that we are headed for a two-track agriculture. One track is a largely "competitive" free-market industrialized agriculture that can only survive in the E.U. and in large parts of the U.S. with massive subsidies, which, to be acceptable to the WTO, have to be recast as direct supports, independent of production. The second track is a small, designer quality/organic sector that produces highly priced niche goods for those who can afford it and who wish for health, environmental and taste reasons, to escape the dangers of mass-produced food. (2007: 78.)

In spite of this ongoing co-optation, many people have been drawn to organic agriculture. As Guthman reports (2004, 23): "A generation of organic growers entered into organic production because of deeply held political, environmental, philosophical and/or spiritual values." And many of these people were women.

Women and Organic Agriculture

Women have been active in organic agriculture from its inception. A pivotal influence on the nascent organic movement was Lady Eve Balfour (1899-1990), the first president and co-founder of

what became the Soil Association (Fox n.d.). At the age of 20, and as one of the first women ever to graduate in agriculture from the University of Reading, she purchased the New Bells Farm and later the adjoining Walnut Tree Farm in Haughley Green, Suffolk. In 1939, she and her neighbor Alice Debenham started the first large-scale comparison of conventional and organic farming methods in what is today called the Haughley Experiment (Balfour 1975). The goal of the study was "to investigate the causes of positive health in crops and livestock, and particularly, the relationship between the health of the soil and of the crops and livestock raised upon it" (Balfour 1948, 157).

One of Balfour's greatest contributions was to demonstrate the research insights that could only be revealed by monitoring whole systems. The Haughley Experiment compared three systems—organic, inorganic, and mixed organic and inorganic—each of which was a fully operating and closed system with its own crops, stock, and marketing scheme. Predictably, her novel, whole-system approach was roundly criticized by agricultural researchers of the day, whose work concentrated on replicated small plots. Nonetheless, her side-by-side farming systems trial, which continued to yield insights for 50 years (Blakemore 2000) before succumbing to continual financial problems (Fox n.d.), provided the first scientifically grounded evidence of the interactions among system components that drive organic practice.

Over the years, many other women have been drawn to organic agriculture. In the U.S. and the U.K., for example, women constitute 21 percent of organic farmers, while women are 17 times more likely than men to adopt organic methods of horticulture production (Sachs 2006). Researchers in Denmark, Norway, and Germany have found similar patterns in women's participation in organic agriculture (Sachs 2006). In Canada, there were just over 1,000 women organic farmers in 2001 and by 2006, there were 1,570—200 of whom were the sole farm operator (Statistics Canada, 2001, 2006). This increase corresponds to the growing number of organic farms in Canada, which rose by almost 60 percent in five years (Canadian Press 2008). The largest proportion of women organic farmers in Canada produces organic fruit and vegetables, followed closely by organic animals and animal products (McMahon 2005). Not surprisingly, women's farms are small enterprises—"nearly 80 percent of Canadian farms run exclusively by women have annual receipts of less than $50,000" (McMahon 2005, 135). Women are also active in the organic farming movement in Canada: the Executive Director of the Canadian Organic Growers (COG) is a woman, as is the past president of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario (EFAO), and women also participate actively in local-level leadership in both these and other organic farming organizations. In addition, women comprise at least half of the attendees at organic conferences, as opposed to the conventional agriculture conferences, where men dominate.

Given women's active participation in the field and the alternative philosophy and holistic values associated with organic agriculture, how do women fare in organic agriculture? Are gender relations different from those seen in conventional agriculture? And if so, how do these relations affect rural farming communities? A review of the literature on gender and organic and sustainable farming, complemented by findings from our own recent study of organic farmers in Ontario, Canada, will help to answer these questions.

Gender and Organic Agriculture

Around the world, women are farming organically. But the philosophy and values underpinning organic agriculture do not necessarily guarantee that women farmers and laborers are treated well. According to Meares (1997), gender represents an important distinguishing

characteristic in the social locations of farmers both within and among households, which, in turn, contributes to shaping their actions, worldviews, and perspectives. She cautions, however, that gender relations are muddied on family-based farms because "the unit of production—the agricultural enterprise—is coterminous with the unit of reproduction—the farm household" (Meares 1997, 26).

The authors of a recent study on women and organic agriculture commissioned by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) open their report with the following observation:

> Gender relationships are fundamental worldwide to the way farm work is organized, the way assets such as land, labor, seeds and machinery are managed, and to farm decision-making. Given this, the lack of adequate attention to gender issues within the organic and sustainable farming movements is worrying. The revolutionary potential of sustainable approaches to farming to reshape our food systems, and the way humans interact with those systems, will not be realized unless there is a concerted effort by committed sustainable farmers and consumers to work towards gender equality. Indeed, the question addressed by this paper can be turned on its head. As well as asking how participation in organic and sustainable farming can empower women, we can ask: How does the participation of women broaden and deepen the multiple goals of organic and sustainable farming? (Farnworth and Hutchings 2009, 1.)

In this international report, Farnworth and Hutchings contend that gender relations in organic agriculture do not differ substantially from conventional agriculture (2009). They found that conventional farming in the North is strongly identified with the expression of rural masculinities. One outcome of this expression is the creation of strongly male-gendered spaces, such as farm fairs, which are critical to knowledge production and exchange, yet to which women have almost no access. The authors report that the gender division of labor is relatively fixed in conventional farming with the prevailing model of male farmers and farm wives, and that "mainstream models of the gender division of labor do not appear to have been significantly challenged by sustainable women farmers" (2009, 18). Overall, Farnworth and Hutchings argue, certain broad generalities hold true for women's farm work, whether we consider women's contributions to sustainable or conventional farming. Even in operations that incorporate mechanization and chemical inputs, women's farm work tends to be "labor intensive, largely unmechanized, and rarely involves the application of inorganic chemicals" (2009, 2). Their findings correspond with Trauger (2004, 303), who concluded that "the work roles of women in sustainable agriculture are similar to the work of women in conventional agriculture."

In their report for IFOAM, Farnworth and Hutchings employed the concept of structure—"the political, cultural, economic and social structures within which Organic Agriculture operates"—to help them understand the barriers to women's empowerment through organic agriculture (2009, 4). Although they argue that organic and sustainable farming has the potential to create new structures that actively work towards achieving women's empowerment, they found that "the structure that organic farming operates within continues to privilege and give priority to relationships with men over relationships with women" (2009, 4). Farnworth and Hutchings recommend that the most noteworthy enabling factor to improve women's participation in organic farming is to make a concerted effort at increasing their agency, which they define as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (2009, 3). They also note that it has been hard for the voices of women to influence mainstream organic and sustainable farming discussion and policymaking. "Women need to participate in all decision-making aspects of sustainable and organic agriculture, as

farmers, as researchers and as leaders." (2009, 4.) This recommendation confirms Grandi's finding (2008, 2) that "despite all the contributions of women in organic agricultural and food production, consumption, [and] sustainable development activities, women are still not well enough represented in decision-making bodies."

Research in the United States also gives some coverage to gender relations. In her overview of women farmers in sustainable agriculture in the U.S., Carolyn Sachs (2006, 293) found that while opportunities exist, women also face multiple challenges, including "limited access to land, capital and credits, and are therefore, on average, operating smaller enterprises with fewer resources." She also found that many women operators were not from farm backgrounds and lacked agricultural and/or business experience, while those women who did grow up on farms rarely had the same apprentice-type training in mechanical skills and production as their brothers or other male relatives. Finally, Sachs reported that women often experience difficulty comfortably entering formal and informal agricultural networks and learning environments, which are typically male dominated.

Sachs' findings echo Peter, et al. (2000) who concluded that the voices of women in farming are of particular sociological importance, but women's voices in the sustainable agriculture group they studied—Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI)—could still not be described as loud. However, the authors found that women's voices were "increasing in volume": PFI has elected two women to its board and hosts an annual women's weekend (2000, 231). In addition, "the growth of community supported agriculture and of interest in direct marketing, both areas with greater representation by women, has given women more prominence in the group" (2000).

In her study of a women's sustainable farming network in Wisconsin, Hassanein addressed the question of gender relations by looking at knowledge and sustainable agriculture. "The knowledge the women exchange emerges not only from their production activities, but also in large part from their experiences in a male-dominated industry." (Hassanein, 1997, 256.) Simply put, the knowledge they exchange and the way they exchange it are different from those of predominantly male networks. For Hassanein (1997), this underscores recent criticisms that "prevailing visions of agricultural sustainability fail to incorporate or even recognize the need to change inequitable gender relations in U.S. agriculture." She concludes that the knowledge exchanged among the women in the network may constitute "an important step toward a more inclusive knowledge base upon which a transformed, truly sustainable agriculture may be built" (1997).

In her work on men and women farmers making the transition to sustainable agriculture in southeastern Minnesota, Meares (1997) found that the farmers' gender identities shaped their perception of quality of life, which in turn affected their participation in the sustainable agriculture movement. "At the root of these gendered differences in quality of life is the fact that life goals and daily experiences for male farmers within the family have changed significantly as their involvement in the movement has intensified." (1997, 43). Meares found that much of what men emphasized in describing quality of life reflected the values of the sustainable agriculture movement itself: self-empowerment, social justice, balance in economic gain and environmental health, creativity and autonomy in decision-making, and problem solving. In contrast, their wives' descriptions gave a distinctively gendered shape to quality of life, being largely entwined with their multiple and highly elastic gendered roles and responsibilities on the farm, in the household, and in paid and unpaid work in the community, and much less with their involvement in the movement. Although the women expressed appreciation of, and some identification with, the values promoted by the sustainable agriculture movement, they also reported indicators of quality of life outside of the

movement's collective identity boundaries. Meares warns, however, that it would be inaccurate to suggest that these men and women embrace entirely different worldviews (e.g., both share ideas about the notion of stewardship and its roots in spirituality). And she argues that it would also be inaccurate to suggest that these women experience no affiliation with the sustainable agriculture movement—they attended occasional meetings, participated in field days and supported the movement in other ways. But Meares does propose that the most significant connection between gendered perspectives of quality of life and participation in the movement is found in the notion of personal transformation. Women did not report the same sort of personal transformation that their husbands, who became leaders in the movement, had experienced over the previous decade. While men recognized life experiences such as self-determination, a new work ethic, expanded self-identity as teachers, agricultural "experts," advocates, lobbyists and leaders, their wives emphasized family, their roles within the family, and their activities outside of the farm (off-farm work, church, continuing education, and clubs). Meares concludes that the sustainable agriculture movement must "pause to understand how it is socially constructed" if family farmers are to continue to propel it forward (1997, 45). Otherwise, "personal transformation, and thus social transformation as it is envisioned by the sustainable agriculture movement, [will be] potentially circumscribed by inattention to the meaning-constructing participant and the way in which its participants' lives are socially constructed by gender" (Meares, 1997).

When studying women farmers in sustainable agriculture in Pennsylvania, Trauger (2004) points out that farming in the United States has traditionally been an enterprise controlled by men, with men assumed to be the "farmer" and women assumed to be the "farmwife." She argues that when women take on the role of farmer "they transgress the traditional gender roles, work cultures and ideologies that define the social narratives of farming" (2004). Women farmers in her study renegotiated gender identities by wearing masculine clothes, having work-roughened hands, and cultivating what they saw as their "masculine side." They were aware of their actions and saw them as "an opportunity to 'educate' others about what it means to be a farmer *and a woman*" (2004). Trauger found that the most difficult spaces for women to occupy as farmers were in the conventional agriculture community, while "the most comfortable spaces for them were within the sustainable agriculture community" (2004). In light of these findings, she argues that conventional agriculture marginalizes women from spaces of knowledge, but sustainable agriculture provides spaces of empowerment for women farmers: "These spaces have the potential to be constructed as sites of resistance from which we can witness the creation of new gender identities." (2004.)

Six years later, Trauger, et al. (2010, 44) found that "in sustainable agriculture systems, the construction of masculinity and femininity, and their relationships to work roles and decision making, are changing." Overall, they argue (2010, 44) that women in sustainable agriculture "are more likely to take on non-traditional productivist roles, with primary responsibilities for the work and decision-making related to business development and management, resource allocation, production of crops and livestock, marketing of products, and development of new value-added businesses." The authors warn, however, that these changes are not total or transformative because "women still shoulder the burden of domestic work in addition to taking on more of the productive work of the farm" (2010, 44).

Research in Canada also offers some insights into gender relations. For example, after studying women organic farmers resisting globalization, McMahon (2002) argues that small-scale farmers and urban farmers are very often women, especially in the Third World but also among organic farmers in British Columbia. That said, she points out that

> small farmers, whether male or female, are culturally and politically "feminized" in discourse and economic regimes that construct them as powerless, unproductive, dependent, locally embedded, and parochial (reminiscent of depictions of women's bond of family), inefficient, and non-rational in their commitments to the local and traditional and in their failure to modernize or participate in agribusiness. (McMahon, 2002, 205.)

In a later paper on engendering organic agriculture, McMahon found that "neither critiques of conventional agriculture nor the development of organic agriculture has taken gender seriously" (2005, 135). She warns that "the organic movement does not recognize that the conventionalization of organic agriculture, like earlier developments in non-organic agriculture, is itself a gendered process" (2005, 138) distancing women from farm production and decision-making. If present trends continue, McMahon predicts that "organic farming will be dominated by the same concentrated economic forces and exploitative ecological and social relationships the movement promised to resist" (2005, 135).

In their landmark research on organic farmers in Ontario, Hall and Mogyorody found that while a significant percentage of farmers working together in heterosexual couples (38 percent) reported that decisions were shared equally, "most organic farms exhibited a fairly conventional gendered division of labor and power" (2007, 295). They found that males were generally not involved in day-to-day domestic purchases, management, or child care, "but were invariably involved, and despite their claim of female control over the household, often had veto power in major purchases or child decisions such as changing schools or discipline issues" (2007, 297). However, Hall and Mogyorody found that males made more decisions on field crop farms than on mixed crop livestock farms and vegetable farms, a finding they explain through reference to the fact that field crop farms are less labor intensive than both vegetable and livestock farms. The authors put forward the hypothesis that "a farm's labour intensity is a key indicator in shaping greater female involvement in production and decision-making" (2007, 302).

In their findings, Hall and Mogyorody confirm the need to clearly differentiate actual farmer orientations and practices when seeking to link organic farming to gender relations. Some organic farmers follow conventional thinking and cite profit considerations as an important motivation for farming organically, while those with alternative orientations viewed organic farming more as a way of life than a business:

> An alternative orientation to organic farming has the potential to alter gender relations in agriculture, both by creating a labor process context in which women can more readily participate in farm production and management….and by introducing and promoting alternative ways of thinking that are more consistent with gender equality. However, whether this transformative potential is realized fully over time is another matter. (2007, 311-312.)

For Hall and Mogyorody, the fact that most organic farms are conventional in their gender relations is cause enough for caution in predicting major changes through the development of organic farming, especially given the pressures to industrialize and conventionalize organic farming. All in all, they propose that

> The gender potential of organic farming may not be realized unless there is a more concerted effort by committed alternative organic farmers and consumers to work to preserve organic farming, not only as an alternative agricultural movement, but also as a social movement concerned with gender equality. (2007, 312.)

Hall and Mogyorody agree with other researchers that "alternative farming will not produce transformed gender relations without specific political and ideological attention to promoting gender-neutral practices and ideas within organic farm organizations and farms" (2007, 312-313. They emphasize that women cannot make significant progress unless there are changes taking place at the points of production that open spaces for female involvement and power sharing.

And finally, in her study of women organic farmers in southwestern Ontario, Maceachern (2008) asked whether men and women on organic farms have an equitable and non-traditional gendered division of labor and whether they share equally in the decision-making process. She found that the division of labor from her sample followed a patriarchal division, with men more focused in the production-oriented sphere and women's attention focused in the reproductive area. In contrast, she found that the decision-making process on organic farms offered some opportunity for difference. While the decision-making process on conventional farms allocates the majority of the decision-making power to men, she found organic farm families show different patterns.

> Because of women's immersion in the domestic sphere they actually have more decision-making power than men on organic farms. This is because they are equally involved in the production-based decisions and almost solely responsible for the reproductive decisions. (2008, 123.)

As more and more women take up organic agriculture, they have the potential to change the face of farming. Beyond the farm gate, however, have questions of gender and organic agriculture begun to affect rural communities?

Gender, Organic Agriculture and Rural Communities

Overall, there seems to be little research that extends the examination of gender and organic agriculture to rural communities. In their work for IFOAM, Farnworth and Hutchings do not refer to communities directly, but they report that women are primarily interested in producing for local markets, running small farms, and working with family labor. "For women in particular, the boundaries between economic and non-economic activities are often fluid, as women seek to combine their roles as mothers and homemakers with community development and with income-generation." (2009, 2.)

In her research in southeastern Minnesota, Meares points out that women farmers' work experiences are not confined to the farm—"work in and for the community makes up a large part of both farm women's and men's work life" (1997, 29). But she contends that labor for community purposes has largely been gendered. As documented by Rosenfeld, "community work for women is largely an extension of their reproductive role on the farm and in the household; for men, it is linked to their productive role"—women were more likely to belong to community organizations and men were more likely to belong to commodity associations (Meares, 1997, 29).

Trauger, et al. (2010) discuss new types of entrepreneurship on farms in Pennsylvania, which increasingly emphasize local food systems as a strategy of resistance to the commodification, industrialization, and globalization of the food system. They report that Lyson labels these new types of food systems as civic agriculture: "the process of building local markets through direct sales to consumers—markets which are designed to promote community social and economic development in ways that commodity agriculture cannot" (2010, 44). Issues of gender play out in rural

communities where women farmers become entrepreneurs. In this study, many women felt they were not taken seriously as farmers in their community and "reported experiencing some degree of sexism when seeking financial support, purchasing equipment or attempting to integrate into the local farming community" (2010, 51). For some women, "the exclusionary nature of rural and agricultural communities meant being denied credibility, and ultimately, the long-term support of their community" (2010, 51). Trauger, et al. observed that "women farmers attribute their marginalization to the combination of their lack of conformity to traditional gender roles and their choice to practice agriculture outside of the commodity farming system" (2010, 51). They qualify their observation, however, by adding that "rather than being solely a liability, "many women relate this experience of non-conformity as a creative exercise, one that capitalizes on both the strengths of their identity as women and their abilities to exploit new opportunities in their communities" (2010, 51). Overall, women in the study redefined successful farming in terms of providing services to their community, as well as in terms of profit and productivity. Resistance to this redefinition was indicated by "the belittling many of them have received by the conventional and predominantly male farming community around them as they experimented with alternative models of production" (2010, 53). The authors conclude that "the growth of civic forms of agriculture parallels the trend toward women-owned businesses that change the realities of work as well as the impact of business on community," (2010, 53) especially by challenging hegemonic gender identities.

In Canada, McMahon has outlined the contributions women organic farmers make to their rural communities in British Columbia. The farmers she studied have

> set up local farmers' markets, encouraged other women to become farmers, helped low-income women access rental or exchange agreements for farm land, shared knowledge, developed apprenticeship programs, educated their communities on health and ecological issues, protected local farm land from urban development, worked with food banks, and carried out a ride range of other actions that fuse agriculture, social justice, ecology, health, and community building. (2005, 136-137).

Given the paucity of data in this vital area of human interaction, more studies need to be carried out to understand the impacts of gender and organic agriculture on rural communities.

Observations from a Study of Organic Farmers in Ontario, Canada

This overview of gender and organic farming resonates with some of the findings from our own recent research with organic farmers in southern Ontario, conducted over a six-month period in 2007. Our research focused on organic agriculture and the social economy and did not take gender relations as its primary focus. Nonetheless, our in-depth qualitative interviews with 65 organic farmers, 26 of whom were women, yielded valuable insights into the specific challenges that women organic farmers face, the concerns that they articulate, and the ways in which they negotiate gendered roles and responsibilities in the household, on the farm, and in their wider communities.

Like the participants in both Maceachern's and Trauger, et al.'s studies (2008; 2010), the women farmers who contributed to our research participated actively in decision-making on matters related to production, while also taking primary responsibility for the reproductive domain. The women we spoke with tended to view their roles as wives, mothers, farmers, and active members of farming organizations and cooperatives as deeply enmeshed and fundamentally complementary.

Several reflected explicitly on the holistic nature of their myriad activities, which they linked conceptually in terms of a practice of caring for family, community, animals, plants, and the land.

Indeed, many women farmers described their family's decision to adopt organic production methods as flowing directly from their efforts to fulfill reproductive responsibilities by providing a healthy diet and environment for their children. In a large number of cases, the foray into organic production begins with an organic kitchen garden, initiated and maintained by the woman farmer. Sometimes these home gardens blossom into organic CSAs; in other cases, success with the garden encourages the farmers to transition their field crops or dairy operation to organic production.

Maintaining a cohesive work-family life figured for several of our women interviewees as a secondary motivation to farm organically. These women cited the premium they receive on organic products as a crucial component of the farm income needed to support two full-time producers. Women farmers spoke about the pleasure of working closely with their husbands and emphasized the value they placed on being able to spend time with their children. Stories about finding ways to incorporate childcare into their work routine by working the farmers' market booth with an older child or taking a toddler along on a CSA delivery route were generally told with fond nostalgia.

However, while many women described their ability to juggle farm work and reproductive responsibilities as a source of satisfaction, others hinted at the constraints entailed in taking on the kind of double burden evoked by Trauger, et al. (2010). Several women farmers cited childcare responsibilities as an impediment to women's active participation in farming organizations: "Usually if there's a man-woman team on the farm, the role system kicks in, and the woman brings the kids to bed, the guy goes to the meeting." More than one participant suggested, however, that this dynamic is changing over time: "we have a few women on the board, now… and the guys babysit."

As mentioned earlier, women in Canada take active leadership roles in organizations like COG and the EFAO, and in our study we found this is true also in alternative producers' groups like the National Farmers Union (NFU), and organic farmers' cooperatives like Organic Meadow. All of the women who spoke on the subject felt that the organic organizations in which they participate make space for women's perspectives, and several noted that these groups actively solicit women members for leadership positions.

As observed by Hassanein (1997), women farmers in our study used their involvement in organic agriculture organizations both as an opportunity to talk about issues relating to production and as a chance to share and gather information on nutrition, alternative medicine, home gardening, and other subjects of relevance to women's traditional reproductive responsibilities. "It's more about health issues… like, 'What do you do differently for [this illness]? And what do you differently for that…?' The natural way of doing things… And then the cheese making, and the garden."

Women also derived satisfaction from the opportunity to move into teaching and leadership roles through organic organizations. One woman farmer, now teaching the EFAO's Introduction to Organic Agriculture course, told us that she looked forward to EFAO meetings as a chance to talk about production challenges with other knowledgeable women farmers. Another emphasized her active role with the EFAO as an important source of self-worth, and a means of cultivating a public identity commensurate with that of her husband, a respected member of the organic farming community in Ontario.

In contrast to Meares' findings in 1997, women farmers in our recent study did not tend necessarily to frame their community work as an extension of their reproductive roles on the farm and in the home, but rather described these activities in more holistic terms, as an expression of their complex, gendered identities as farmers, activists, wives, and mothers. Our findings suggest that many women organic farmers derive considerable satisfaction from cultivating a lifestyle in which the practice of caring for their families, stewarding their land, nourishing their communities, and participating in the organic movement may be brought together into an integrated whole.

Nonetheless, Hall and Mogyorody's (2007) call for greater attention to gender relations both in organic farming families and the wider movement for alternative agriculture is well taken. The risk of burnout was raised by both men and women farmers who were active in cooperatives and farming organizations, but received particular attention from women farmers. For many women organic farmers, the task of managing their households, contributing to farm labor and decision-making, and participating in community organizations or organic commodity groups leaves little time for care of oneself. In the words of one farmer in our study, who is also a mother, wife, and NFU local president:

> I'm getting tired. And I want to farm. And I want to ride my horse. I mean, I was at a meeting until 11 o'clock last night. And that's [not uncommon], because you get caught up in this, and you can't help it. It's good stuff, and it's very exciting how things are happening, and the momentum. But it's just not sustainable either. So here we are, talking about sustainable farming, and I can't even keep my life sustainable.

Despite their fidelity to an organic vision of integration between the spheres of family, ecology, community, and economics, many of the women organic farmers we spoke with found themselves wishing for a way of establishing boundaries between these domains, and carving out a little more space for themselves.

Discussion

A number of themes emerge from the studies discussed above.

The first theme involves the opportunity that organic agriculture offers for addressing rural gender relations. Its holistic philosophy, counter-hegemonic stance, and alternative orientation open up spaces where gender issues can be discussed and addressed.

The second theme, however, raises the specter of an opportunity being squandered. That is, in spite of its alternative approach, the organic agriculture movement is not 'walking the talk' when it comes to equitable gender relations. Even among dedicated alternative organic farmers, gender relations were often "not on the radar screens" (Hall and Mogyorody 2007, 313). "This neglect leaves organic agriculture vulnerable to reproducing many of the problems it was intended to solve." (McMahon 2005, 135.)

The third theme indicates that glimmers of hope are appearing as women organic farmers continue to increase in numbers and make their presence felt in rural communities. The IFOAM report represents a landmark as this large international organization addresses gender issues head-on. Entitled *Organic Agriculture and Women's Empowerment* (2009), the report makes four recommendations:

1. making an active choice for gender equality
2. working positively with indigenous people
3. situation-specific interventions
4. appropriate market-oriented production.

While IFOAM's recommendations are not binding, they represent formidable pressure to push the boundaries of organic agriculture beyond production issues.

The fourth theme highlights the importance of women's knowledge networks. As women farm and participate in off-farm activities, they share knowledge in a variety of areas that helps them to navigate the turbulent waters of alternative farming in an uncertain economy, all of which is cross-cut with gender issues. Maintaining these networks and the spaces that enable such networks is crucial for women organic farmers, for the rural communities they support, and for the organic movement.

The fifth theme is the threat of conventionalization—the process by which "agribusiness is finding ways to industrialize organic production" (Buck, Getz, and Guthman 1997, 4). The ongoing industrialization of organic agriculture replaces a holistic systems approach with a linear throughput based on yield and profit. In essence, the industrialization process offers consumers a disembedded commodity while jettisoning the consideration of wider issues, such as the environment, fair trade, and gender relations.

As organic agriculture is being sucked into the vortex of the global industrial food system, other forms of resistance are taking its place. The local food movement, for example, is gaining strength. But even new forms of certification, like Local Food Plus (Friedmann 2007) which covers eight vital areas including fair treatment of hired labor and animal rights, do not include any consideration of gender.

Finally, the sixth theme involves alternatives to industrial agriculture—whether conventional or organic. As a number of researchers have pointed out, sustainable forms of agriculture will not realize their full potential unless they attend to non-production issues such as gender. Hall and Mogyorody (2007) allude to this when they differentiate between the orientation and practices of organic farmers: some farmers followed conventional thinking and cited profit considerations as an important motivation for farming organically, while others followed alternative thinking and viewed organic farming more as a way of life than a business opportunity. Alternative thinking is critical for establishing a food system that not only involves sustainable production practices, but also attends to wider social and economic issues such as gender, class and race-ethnicity. This alternative orientation is captured in the observation that there is no such thing as sustainable agriculture if the people who pick the food can't afford to buy it.

Kuper (2007) proposes that it is actually simple to envisage a genuine alternative—one that starts from social and environmental objectives, rather than a mystical faith in market forces. For Kuper,

> A genuine alternative would be based on a positive valuation of rural life in general and agriculture in particular. It would operate in conjunction with, rather than in domination over, nature, valuing diversity of plants, animals, and environments. It would respond to citizens' demand for food that can be trusted and taste better. (2007, 79.)

But even Kuper's vision of a genuine alternative does not include gender issues. It leaves out those women organic farmers who reach beyond the dominant orientation of capital accumulation to improve their communities, thus exhibiting alternative thinking and providing a role model for others seeking a way out of the evolutionary dead-end of industrial agriculture.

Conclusion

In spite of its holistic philosophy, the organic agriculture movement has not lived up to its potential to offer a truly alternative vision, because it has largely ignored gender issues. As McMahon argues, women organic farmers advocate "local production, non-market subsistence, and reclaiming localized markets as ways of re-embedding food and farming in place, space and moral relationships" (2005, 135). For McMahon, women organic farmers "work within the kinds of ethical, ideological, social, and material relationships that would help the organic movement retain its radical promise, if gender and feminist analysis were taken seriously" (2005, 135). McMahon's observations help to answer Farnworth and Hutching's (2009) opening question: How does the participation of women broaden and deepen the multiple goals of organic and sustainable farming?

Ten years ago, DeLind observed that "organic without a social vision is dangerously incomplete" (2000, 24). Today, it is clear that this social vision must include equitable gender relations. Both within and beyond the farm gate, equitable gender relations are vital to sustainable agriculture, sustainable communities, and sustainable food systems.

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