

What causes the low share of female farm managers? An explorative study from Eastern Germany

Warum gib es so wenig Betriebsleiterinnen in Deutschland? Eine explorative Studie aus den neuen Bundesländern

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Summary

While more than 50% of the graduates of agricultural and nutritional sciences have been women for more than a decade in Germany, the share of female farm managers has remained at a level of 10%. This provokes two central questions: are women disadvantaged when farm management vacancies are filled? Or are farm management positions not attractive for women? To shed light on these questions, we have carried out seven focus group discussions with agricultural students (n=38) and seven guideline interviews with farm managers. The analysis of these discussions and interviews indicates that the disproportionately low share of female farm managers stems from both the supply side (i.e., the women who are qualified to fill in management vacancies) and the demand side (i.e., the decision-makers who recruit management staff).

Keywords: farm management succession, gender dependent recruitment behavior, gender specific career choices, low share of female managers

Zusammenfassung

Obwohl regelmäßig 50% der AbsolventInnen der Agrar- und Ernährungswissenschaften in Deutschland weiblich sind, wird nur jeder zehnte Betrieb von einer Frau geleitet. Dies wirft zwei zentrale Fragen

auf: Werden qualifizierte Frauen von den derzeitigen EntscheidungsträgerInnen weniger als Nachwuchsführungskräfte in Betracht gezogen? Oder haben die Frauen selbst weniger Interesse an derartigen Positionen? Um diesen Fragen nachzugehen, wurden in den neuen Bundesländern sieben Fokusgruppendifkussionen mit Studierenden (n=38) und sieben leitfadengestützte Interviews mit Betriebsleiterinnen und Betriebsleitern geführt. Die Auswertung dieser Gespräche deuten darauf hin, dass die Gründe für den geringen Frauenanteil sowohl auf der Angebotsseite, d. h. bei den Frauen selbst, als auch auf der Nachfrageseite, d. h. beim derzeitigen Führungspersonal, zu verorten sind.

Schlagworte: Betriebsleiternachfolge, geschlechtsabhängige Personalauswahl, geschlechtsspezifische Berufswahl, geringer Frauenanteil in Führungspositionen

1. Problem background and research questions

Within the past decade, the share of German farms that are managed by women stagnated at around 10% (LINARES, 2003, 2; STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, 2011, 121), with currently approximately 17% (4 100) female farm managers in Eastern and approximately 8% (21 600) in Western Germany (STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, 2011, 121-137). However, the gender distribution of agricultural students, who constitute the main reservoir from which to recruit the next generation of farm managers, is entirely different: regularly more than 50% of the graduates of agricultural and nutritional science are female (STATISTISCHES BUNDESAMT, 2013, 13). The discrepancy between qualified women and female farm managers gives rise to the question of what causes the low share of female farm managers in Germany. Empirical studies on this issue in various European countries contain ambiguous messages. On the one hand, there are studies which show that exclusive patriarchal farm succession patterns are decreasing in family farms in European countries (e.g., OTOMO and OEDL-WIESER, 2009). On the other hand, there is evidence that gender-specific socializations continue to generate differences in the individual motivation to take up farming (ROSSIER and WYSS, 2006; SCHMITT, 1997). In corporate farming, barriers commonly described by the metaphor "glass-ceiling" may provide a second explanation why so few women have advanced to management positions in agriculture. Literature on the "glass-ceiling" identifies gender bias

evaluation due to stereotyping or prejudice toward female leaders as one key barrier (e.g., OAKLEY, 2000). The latter may be especially relevant in Eastern Germany, where corporate farms with salaried managers are substantially more common than in Western Germany.

Conceptually, the empirical phenomenon of the low share of female farm managers can be understood as the result of a specific “supply behavior” (i.e., the career decisions made by women) and a specific “demand behavior” (i.e., the recruiting decisions made by the executives in place). Two core research questions can be derived from this conceptual perspective:

- 1) Are male students more inclined to become farm managers than female students, and if so, why?
- 2) Are those who are in charge of hiring future farm managers “hunters for the best heads” or are they likely to be distracted by evaluation bias against women?

2. Data and methods

To shed light on the research question concerned with the “supply side”, we conducted semi-structured focus group discussions with agricultural students of the Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (MLU) in 2012. A pretest was carried out, and subsequently questions were refined. A total of n=38 students (20 female, 18 male) participated in three all-female, three all-male and one mixed focus group discussion within the university setting. We selected students from all graduate programs offered at the MLU as participants (see Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Description of focus group participants

Sex	Mean age	Focus of the interviewees' study program
F (20)	22.6	Agricultural economics and social sciences (10), animal production (3), plant production (1), no focus yet (6)
M (18)	23.0	Agricultural economics and social sciences (8), animal production (2), plant production (7), no focus yet (1)

Source: own data, 2012

The focus group discussions lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were afterwards verbatim transcribed. Students were asked about their career plans in general and, in particular, whether and why they consider (do not consider) being a farm manager as a career option. Addi-

tionally, the students were asked to write down a list of factors preventing and motivating them to become a farm manager. KRUEGER and CASEY's (2000) focus groups data analysis was applied to analyze the transcribed material. Consequently, categories of answers relevant for the research question were identified and quotes were classified according to their content. For evaluating the weight of these categories, attention was paid to four key factors: frequency, extensiveness, specificity, and emotion. The analysis includes the comparison of the comments of female and male participants.

To shed light on the research question concerned with the "demand side", we carried out seven semi-structured interviews with farm managers (4=female, 3=male) from family farms as well as agricultural companies in East Germany in 2012 (see Tab. 2).

Tab. 2: Description of interviewed farm-managers and farms

Sex	Position	Farm
F	Chairwoman of the board of management (e.G.)	21 FTW ^a , 1 500 ha agricultural land, 280 dairy cows
F	Chairwoman of the board of management (e.G.)	35 FTW ^a , 2 987 ha agricultural land, 250 dairy cows
F	Managing director (GmbH & Co KG)	43 FTW ^a , 2 300 ha agricultural land, 450 dairy cows, 100 suckler cows
F	Farm manager (Family farm)	37 FTW ^a , 3 500 ha agricultural land, 730 dairy cows
M	Managing director (Corporate group)	125 FTW ^a , 10 600 ha agricultural land, 640 cattle, 650 dairy cows
M	Managing director (GmbH)	6 FTW ^a , 825 ha agricultural land
M	Farm manager (GbR)	30 FTW ^a , 2 500 ha agricultural land, 450 dairy cows, 3 000 pigs

^a) FTW = full-time workers; source: own data, 2012

The interviews were conducted in the familiar setting of the farm and lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. Since the research question is associated with prejudice, it represents a sensitive question that the interviewed farm managers might have been prone to answer in a socially desirable manner. We consequently asked indirect questions about farm managers' beliefs on the reasons for the lack of female farm managers. The interviewees were asked to describe which qualifications a farm manager needs. They were also asked to indicate gender specific advantages and disadvantages. Asking indirect questions is often applied in consumer research and has proven to be an effective way to

reduce social desirability bias (e.g., FISHER, 1993). The interviews were verbatim transcribed and analyzed applying the reductive content analysis according to MAYRING (2003). The aim of this method of analysis is to reduce the data material without losing essential contents. The analysis is a stepwise reduction and summarization of collected data.

3. Are male students more inclined to become farm managers than female students, and if so, why?

The analysis of the focus group discussions indicates that male students are, on average, more enthusiastic and determined to become a farm manager. Almost all interviewed male students do consider becoming a farm manager as a viable and realistic career option. In contrast to this, the majority of female students have not yet made up their mind about their career plans. The analysis of the focus group data shows that female and male students shared many beliefs on the motivating factors for becoming a farm manager. For example, the long working hours were mostly evaluated to be a drawback of the job. Most students considered the autonomy an incentive for becoming a farm manager. However, gender specific differences in the frequency, extensiveness, specificity and emotionality of comments regarding the motivating factors for becoming a farm manager were found. Hereafter we discuss three central categories: (i) compatibility of family life and being a farm manager, (ii) evaluations of own competences, and (iii) anticipated enjoyment of being a farm manager.

Regarding the emotionality and frequency of comments, female students consider the job's incompatibility with a family as a central disadvantage: *"I simply think that the problem women have with the farm manager position is that they have to decide between job and family. If you assume that a farm manager has to have experience and therefore is a little older, it gets critical for a woman, because she has to decide whether she wants this position or she wants to have a child."* [B3] In contrast to being a key topic for female students, only few of the male interviewees mentioned the aspect of compatibility of family and career as an obstacle for becoming a farm manager. In fact, most male students appeared to be unconcerned about the issue of family and career compatibility and only comment on inquiry to this issue: *"I would start with being financially secure at first and after that I would start considering the family. [...]* It is

difficult to say, I haven't thought about that [compatibility of family and being a farm manager], but actually you are right." [G1] These findings support earlier studies which indicate that predominately women perceive active parenting and leadership positions to be incompatible (e.g., LIFF and WARD, 2001).

The second category where gender-specific differences were found in the group of students is the "self-efficacy" evaluations, i.e., the self-evaluation of their competences. The students agreed in general that it is difficult to acquire all competences that a farm manager needs solely through university studies and internships. However, while the majority of male students grew up on a farm, only a minority of female students share this experience. This finding suggests that on farm socialization is gender-specific and induces male descendants rather than female descendants to study agriculture. Helping on a farm from an early age was evaluated to be an advantage difficult to catch up with: *"It is more difficult than for someone who grew up with it. Who stood in the stable with six and knows how everything is done, then coming in and saying: okay, I have to look at all of this. I think that if you have the will and the interest to deal with it, then you can manage to do so. But it is more difficult and it will always be more difficult."* [C6] Furthermore, in one of the all-female focus groups, the lack of sufficient practical and/or professional skills was emotionally discussed to be a reason for not feeling qualified to become a farm manager. None of the male students displayed serious doubts about their practical or professional skills. The finding that "self-efficacy" evaluations play a key role in career development and pursuit is supported by ample empirical evidence from outside agriculture (BANDURA, 1997).

A third category where gender-specific differences between female and male students were identified is the anticipated enjoyment of being a farm manager. Considering the extensiveness of comments by male students, enjoying the task to manage a farm is the core motivation for wanting to become a farm manager. Typically, male students displayed a high amount of passion, when speaking about the job: *"[It is a] calling rather than a job."* [F1] In contrast, fewer female students expressed the belief that they would enjoy working as a farm manager. Those who spoke passionately about the job mostly also stated that they wanted to become a farm manager. Female students' comparatively low interest in the tasks of a farm manager may also be connected to their lower

level of practical experience: theories on career choice highlight that positive self-efficacy beliefs are achieved by successfully carrying out a task; this, in turn, positively influences interest (e.g., LENT et al., 1994). In conclusion, our findings from the “supply side” indicate that male students are indeed more inclined to become a farm manager than female students.

4. Are those in charge of hiring future farm managers “hunters for the best heads“ or are they distracted by evaluation bias?

After following the steps of paraphrasing, generalizing and reducing, the analysis of the seven interviews with farm managers indicates that farm managers may indeed be prone to gender biased evaluations. The interviews with both male and female farm managers suggest that traditional notions of femininity and masculinity still play a central role in agriculture. Most interviewees assume men to be strong and technically versed individuals who are the main breadwinner for the family. Women are assumed to be less physically and technically versed, as well as more emotional. They are also assumed to be the principal caretaker of the family. These notions endanger the impartiality of recruitment decisions due to three key aspects: (i) women are assumed to be less flexible in their time management, (ii) women are assumed to be less qualified for practical on-farm activities, and (iii) the prevailing masculine culture in agriculture. In the following, these three aspects are described in more detail.

First, being a farm manager is described as a very time intensive job with inflexible working hours. Consequently, all interviewees evaluated having children and being a farm manager at the same time as hardly possible for women. In fact, three out of the four interviewed female farm managers explicitly stated that they would have never considered being a farm manager while their children were still young. As one female farm manager explained: *“As long as a women has a family, meaning, if children live at home and the man has a position with responsibility too, someone has to keep the house in order, haven’t they? [...] But during haroest, there is so much work. You also have to work on some Saturdays and Sundays. And that is, for women, difficult.”* [D6] Due to the predominately shared belief that women ought to be the primary caretaker of children, almost

all interviewees agreed that a disadvantage of female applicants is that they are less flexible in their time management. Furthermore, two interviewees even explicitly stated that they see the employment of a young female farm manager as hardly possible, as a temporary drop out due to pregnancy and/or parental leave represents an excessive financial risk.

The second potential determinant for gender biased evaluation, which is also directly connected to the prevalent notions of femininity and masculinity, is the notion that women are less versed in practical agricultural work. This was stated to be a key reason for the lack of female farm manager, especially by male interviewees. In addition to the assumed lack of sufficient physical strength, women were evaluated to be less able to appropriately handle and/or repair the agricultural machinery. These findings supports prior empirical evidence, leading to BRANDTH's (1994, 131) conclusion that: "The masculinization of farming became particularly marked after the mechanization of agriculture." Thus, although the need for physical strength is de facto reduced by an employment of machinery, the results suggest that on farm work is still mainly reserved and seen as appropriate for men. This is especially interesting given the fact that all farm managers reported that, as managers, they do not have to do practical agricultural work.

A third potential source for gender biased evaluations against female applicants is the prevalent masculine culture in agriculture. Three out of the four interviewed female farm managers reported that they had to adapt to the masculine way of behavior in agriculture in order to be accepted by male colleagues and employees. One female interviewee reported of speaking more aggressively or in a deeper voice when talking to colleagues and employees. Another interviewee reported that she had to learn to be less emotional at the workspace, as this was evaluated negatively by her colleagues. As one farm manager summarized her experiences in her masculine work environment: "*As a woman you have to learn, these are the rules of the game.*" [C36] In general, the interviews indicate that masculine behavior is the more accepted way of behavior in the agricultural sphere. This suggests that applicants for management position who do not comply with this prevalent masculine behavior are likely to have a disadvantage. This entails the risk that female applicants are less favorably evaluated. The finding that a predominant male culture is a serious problem for (potential) female

farm managers is also supported by empirical evidence from Australia. Australian female farm managers report that in order to succeed in the agricultural sphere, they had/have to be willing and able to adapt to masculine behavior (PINI, 2005).

In conclusion, our findings from the “demand side” suggest that, comparable to the situation outside agriculture, gender biased evaluations are indeed a barrier for women to obtain leadership positions.

5. Conclusion

While this explorative and qualitative study contributes to a better understanding of the low share of female farm managers in Germany, its most important result is that further research is needed in this field: little solid knowledge exists on the factors and mechanisms that cause the disproportionately low share of female farm managers in Germany. Further research should consider the potential differences for the low share of female farm managers in family farms (family succession problems) and in big corporate farms (management staff recruiting problems). While partly coinciding, another promising angle might be the differences between Western and Eastern Germany.

The results of this qualitative study must be interpreted with caution: group discussions may be susceptible to a thoughtless reproduction of stereotypes or prevailing opinions in present debates. It must be furthermore noted that investigating the partnership models related to career choices and the expectations of women regarding their employment opportunities is beyond the scope of this study.

A better understanding of gender-specific occupational chances and choices may provide decision support for various parties: it may facilitate better political choices, if the increase of the share of women in agricultural leadership positions is a normative societal goal. It may also be important from the economic perspective of the farming enterprise. The current shortage of farming executives (e.g., MÜßHOFF et al., 2013) and the corresponding recruiting problems show that the pool of qualified management staff needs to be fully exploited in the future to prevent shortages. Human capacity building on both the “supply side” and the “demand side” may be necessary to mitigate such shortages.

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