

## Perception of intergenerational relationships on farms in Slovenia through the gender lens

Generationen-Beziehungen in Bauernfamilien in Slowenien aus Gender-Perspektive

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### Summary

The aging population has brought the issue of solidarity among generations into the fore, raising the question of the responsibility of caring for individuals in need. This is a key issue for family farming, which is dependent on succession and intergenerational relationships. In this article, the authors discuss how intergenerational relationships are perceived by the beneficiaries of early retirement schemes and the scheme supporting the establishment young farmers in Slovenia. The analysis of data from a survey indicates that there are similarities in the respondents' views, esp. on gender roles in intergenerational solidarity.

**Keywords:** family farm, succession, intergenerational solidarity.

### Zusammenfassung

Die Alterung der Gesellschaft bringt die Probleme der Solidarität zwischen den Generationen in den Vordergrund. Besonders bei Bauernfamilien spielen die Beziehungen zwischen Generationen eine wichtige Rolle. In diesem Artikel diskutieren die Autorinnen, wie in Slowenien zwei Gruppen von Bauern die Verhältnisse zwischen den Generationen wahrnehmen: die Bauern, die Subventionen für die Frühpensio-nierung bekommen, und die jungen Bauern, die Subventionen für die Übernahme der Bauernhöfen erhalten haben. Die Analyse der Daten einer Umfrage zeigen Ähnlichkeiten in den Standpunkten der Befragten, vor allem bezüglich der geschlechterspezifischen Rollen in der Solidarität zwischen den Generationen.

**Schlagworte:** Bauernfamilie, Übernahme, Solidarität.

## 1. The social position of family farms in Slovenia

In many industrialised countries family farms are still the prevailing form of farming (HILDENBRAND and HENNON, 2005). In Slovenia, family farms represent 99.8% of all agricultural holdings and manage 94.8% of the total utilised agricultural area (SURS, 2006; RDP, 2007, 20). Compared to the average size of holding in the EU-27 (11.5 ha) (EC, 2008), the average holding in Slovenia is relatively small, with 6.3 ha agricultural land (RDP, 2007, 20). Family farms in Slovenia are mainly subsistence-orientated (68.5%) and are frequently located in less favoured areas (75%) (SURS, 2006). Economic productivity remains low and farmers' income is two to three times lower than the income of persons employed in other sectors (KOVAČIČ, 2001).

Since the 1970s, the number of family farms has been decreasing. In the period between 1991 and 2000, the number of family farms was reduced by 25,000 and between 2000 and 2007 a further 10,734 farms were closed (SURS, 2008). This process, linked with larger farmer sizes, can be seen as favourable for agricultural productivity (KOVAČ, 2002). However, the process may undermine of other strategic functions ascribed to the farm activities, e.g.: preserve the settlement, protect the cultural landscape, ensure production potential in the times of eventual supply shortages, assure healthy food and protect the environment in the frame of the eco-social model of farming (PRKP, 1998).

The age structure of farm population is also one of the causes for low agricultural productivity. According to the structural survey in 2005, more than 50% of the operators were over 55 years old, while only 19% of operators were under 45 (RDP, 2007, 23). Moreover, 40% of farms in Slovenia do not have a secured successor (KOVAČIČ, 2001). To address these issues, the Slovenian government introduced the scheme for "Early retirement" in 2004 and the complementary scheme of "Setting up young farmers" in 2005.

Given demographic trends in Slovenia and the increasing importance of intergenerational solidarity for the improvement of quality of life in such demographic context (ČERNIGOJ SADAR and BREŠAR 1996) a secured succession on family farms also represents security in old age. In this paper, we analyse the relationship between the beneficiaries of subsidies for early retirement and young successors and their attitudes

towards intergenerational solidarity in farm families, with particular attention to the gender aspect.

## **2. Studies on family farms in Slovenia**

Despite the significance of family farming in Slovenia, the topic remains marginalised in research. Agrarian economists and geographers focus their analyses primarily on the impact of various factors on farm succession, but the relations between gender and generations has so far been neglected. Gender and generation relations in family farms, however, were more explicitly discussed by rural sociologists and ethnologists. In the 1990s rural sociologists reported that farm women were not interested in marrying farmers (BARBIČ, 1992a) among other reasons because of still strongly gendered division of labour on farm holdings, either on the farms or within the farm households (BARBIČ, 1992b). This result was later corroborated by the findings of the study *Rural Women in Slovenia* (2001), which among other gendered works explicitly stressed that care for older and ill household members is also mainly women's work (ČERNIČ ISTENIČ, 2006). The research results further emphasised that a secured successor was of the utmost importance in assuring the social security of the aged farm people, who were among those who received the lowest pensions on the state level (HRIBERNIK, 1996). Finally, the analysed evidence indicated that farm women gave birth to more children in comparison with non-farm women in Slovenia. Yet this trend did not hinder the aging of the farming population, or the depopulation of rural areas. Both trends were reinforced by the fact that young farmers frequently leave farming. One of the main motives to leave farming, is that succession, i.e. the transfer of ownership, is completed only after the death of the head of household (HRIBERNIK, 1996).

The focus of the study was thus to assess whether the beneficiaries of the subsidy for early succession are better candidates for continuing the family farming compared to the farmers who are non-beneficiaries of such a subsidy. The study further analyses whether there is a gender bias in the person perceived as being responsible to care for the elderly and sick family members in farm households.

### 3. Data and methods

The analysis presented in the article is based on data from the survey 'Generations and Gender Relations on Slovenian Farms 2007'. The questionnaire included topics pertaining to the social context of the farm: ownership, succession, prospects of farms, division of labour and decision-making on farms (ČERNIČ ISTENIČ et al., 2008).

To contextualize intergenerational solidarity in farm families, we compare the answers of respondents living on farms (n=407) with those of people who live in the countryside, but are not engaged in farming (n=135), as well as with those of residents in urban areas (n=275). Further, we distinguish between respondents who are recipients of early retirement or young farmer subsidies (n=301) and those respondents who do not take part in either scheme (n=106).

The differences in the answers, depending on the respondents' age, gender and social setting, considering farm and household characteristics, household labour division and their views on intergenerational solidarity, were analysed using bivariate analysis with  $\chi^2$  test.

### 4. Results

The prospects of farm succession are more favourable on farms which are the beneficiaries of subsidies for early retirement than on farms which are non-beneficiaries of such subsidies. On non-beneficiary farms the succession is most probably (66.7%) to occur after the death of the current farm operator, while on farms which are beneficiaries of subsidies this happens in just 22.9% of cases.

Farms headed by young farmers, i.e., the beneficiaries of subsidies for early succession, tend to be considerably larger (avg: 23.5 ha) than the farms which are the beneficiaries of early retirement. However, farms receiving either subsidy tend to be larger than non-beneficiary farms (mean: 15.4 ha). Among both types of beneficiary farms, more farmers express the intention to increase the size of their farm (32.9% and 24.5%) than farmers on non-beneficiary farms (9.6%).

Young farmers, who are the beneficiaries of subsidies for early succession (37%) and their partners (17%), are more often university graduates in the field of agriculture than farmers from other types of

farms, particularly respondents (5.5%) and their partners (0%) from non-beneficiary farms.

The households of farmers who are the beneficiaries of subsidies for early succession are slightly larger (avg. 4.7 persons) than the households of farmers who are the beneficiaries of subsidies for early retirement (avg. 4.6 persons). However, both types of farms have considerably larger households than non-beneficiary farms (avg. 3.9 persons) or the general non-farm population (avg. 2.9 persons). In the beneficiaries of subsidies, the prevalence of extended three-generation families is higher (57% and 40%) than among non-beneficiary farms (32%) or the general population (19%). In the households which are the beneficiaries of subsidies, 32% of men and only 5% of women, aged 38 and over, live with their parents, whereas in the households of non-beneficiaries of subsidies, 10% of men but no women, aged 38 and over, live with their parents.

Despite the evidence that on farms sons more frequently live with their parents than women do, our analysis revealed that the care for elderly and sick is primarily the domain of farm women. The share of women from beneficiary (13%) and non-beneficiary farms (14%) who care for elderly and sick is considerably higher than the share of men (7% and 2%). Our analysis also showed that caring for elderly and sick is more frequently done in farm households than in rural and urban households. Namely, the share of household members with physical and psychological difficulties is considerably higher in farm households of beneficiaries (13%) and non-beneficiaries of subsidies (12%) than in urban and rural households (5%).

Based on the results of the first analyses, we now look more closely at the respondents' perceptions of intergenerational solidarity, using three sets of statements. The first set of statements refers to the assessment of whose responsibility it is to care for dependent family members (e.g., preschool and school children, the elderly), and whose responsibility it is to financially support elderly and young families in need. The answers show that the family is primarily responsible for the care of preschool and school children (53.8% and 50.2% respectively). However, society and the family are equally obliged (46.4%) to care for the elderly. Regarding financially supporting the elderly and young families in need, it is primarily the responsibility of the society (69.2% and 68.8%). Collating these results by gender, age and social setting,

the data show significant differences among urban-rural-farm settings only regarding caring for the elderly ( $\chi^2= 33,420$ ; sig.= 0,000) and preschool children ( $\chi^2= 20,758$ ; sig.= 0,002). In a considerably greater share, the farm population, irrespective of the subsidy received, agrees that the family is responsible for caring for dependent family members compared to urban and rural dwellers (Fig. 1).

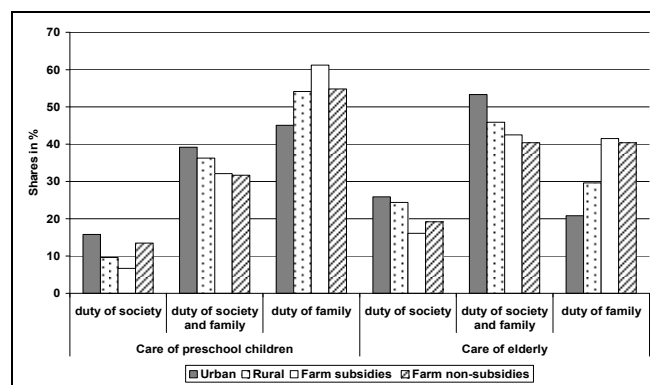


Fig. 1: Responsibility to care for dependent family members, by social setting

The second set of statements refers to the assessment (applying the five-level Likert scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree') of adult children's obligations towards their parents. The statements were:

- Children should take over the duty to care for their parents in need.
- Children should adjust their work to the needs of their parents.
- Daughters should care more for their parents than sons.
- Children should help their parents when they are in financial difficulties.
- Parents should move to the place of their children when they can not care for themselves anymore.

The majority of the respondents agree in principle that children are responsible for caring for their parents (70%) and to assist their parents financially when they are in need (55%). However, most respondents disagree with the more concrete statements, such as 'Daughters should care more for their parents than sons', 'Children should adjust their work to the needs of their parents', and 'Parents should move to the place of their children when they can not care for themselves anymore'

(65%, 41%, and 34% disagree). Comparing these results by gender, age and social setting, significant differences are found only in assessing the statement 'Children should adjust their work to the needs of their parents' (Fig. 2), where a larger share of the farm population agrees, compared to the urban population ( $\chi^2= 33,183$ ; sig.= 0,000).

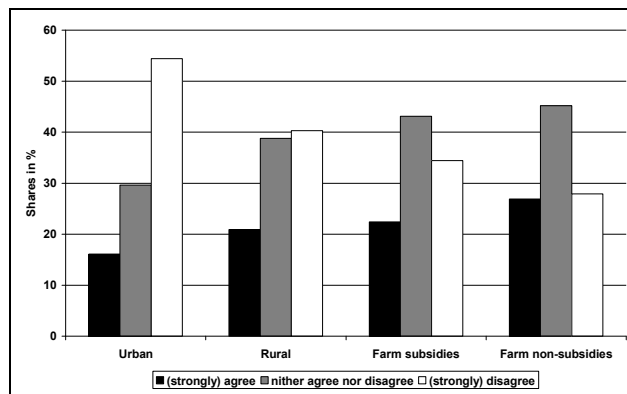


Fig. 2: Agreement with the statement 'Children should adjust their work to the needs of their parents', by social setting

The third set of statements relates to the parents' responsibilities towards their children, assessed using a five-level Likert scale. Following three statements were presented to the respondents:

- Grandparents should care for their grandchildren when their parents are not able to do it.
- Parents should financially support their adult children in need.
- Parents should adapt their life when their children are in need.

The majority of the respondents agree with all three statements: 52.4%, 52.4% and 44.3%. According to these results, it is obvious that the view about parents' responsibility towards their adult children prevails. Significant differences by social setting, gender and age are found regarding the grandparents' obligation towards their grandchildren (Fig. 3).

Women, older respondents and farmers agree with this statement. Significant differences are also found in the answers to the the statement regarding the parent's financial support for their adult children if these are in difficulties, a statement that the manjority of women agree with ( $\chi^2= 7,743$ ; sig.= 0,022) (Fig. 4). Older respondents agree that

'Parents should adapt their lives to their children in need' ( $\chi^2 = 15,876$ ; sig.= 0,003).

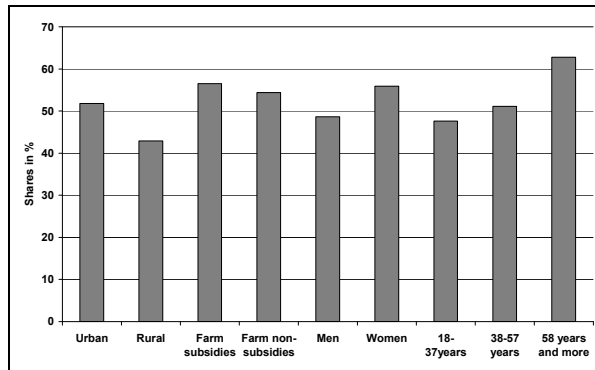


Fig. 3: (Strong) Agreement with the statement 'Grandparents should care for their grandchildren, if their parents are not able to do it', by social setting, gender and age

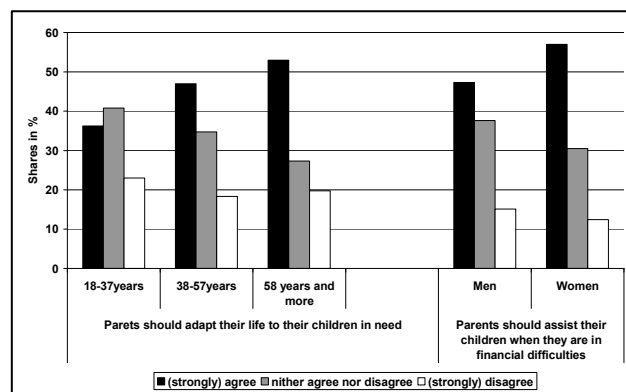


Fig. 4: Agreement with the statement 'Parents should adapt their life to their children in need', by age, and the the statement 'Parents should assist their children when they are in financial difficulties', by gender

The results show that social setting plays a more important role in explaining the variability in attitudes towards intergenerational support, than gender and age. The differences are significant mainly between the urban and farm population. Women's answers mostly do



not differ from those of men, and younger and older respondents mainly express similar views about intergenerational support. The lack of difference between the men and women is also shown in the attitude about the responsibility of sons and daughters towards their elderly parents. There are also no significant differences in attitudes between the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of subsidies. Therefore, although subsidies increase the commitment to farming, they do not have an effect on the perception of intergenerational support.

The comparison of the particular statements offers insights into the character of intergenerational relations, where three ambivalences are identified. The first one relates to the statements about financial support of elderly parents. The majority of respondents believe that society is responsible for financial assistance to the elderly, while in principle, more than half of respondents agree that this is the children's duty. This ambivalence is more pronounced in urban than farm respondents. Urban dwellers, similar to dwellers of other areas, believe society is the most obliged to support elderly people. However, at the same time, they see adult children as the ones most responsible for supporting the elderly. In this regard, it could be stated that farmers, either beneficiaries or non-beneficiaries, are less ambivalent in their expectations towards intergenerational support than the urban population is.

The second ambivalence is extracted from the opposing statements on children's duties towards parents. The majority of urban residents agree that adult children are obliged to care for their parents. But they also strongly disagree that children should adapt their working life to their parents in need. Therefore, compared to the farm population, the urban population is more ambivalent in their expectations towards intergenerational solidarity.

The third ambivalence consists of opposing statements showing parents' greater commitment towards their children than the opposite. This ambivalence is expressed more in view of age than gender and social setting. Older respondents feel particularly obliged to adapt their life to the needs of their adult children in need. But, their expectations related to fulfilment of their needs by their children is much weaker. Last but not least, this case shows that the wealth flow among the family members is more oriented towards the younger than towards

the older generation, which is not in line with the increasing needs of aging society.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Farms that have received subsidies for early retirement or subsidies to assist young farmers show more advantageous characteristics for the farm development than non-beneficiary farms. The beneficiaries have better prospects to continue farming and to assist the aged parents. Yet in farm households the care for the elderly is unequally distributed between genders. Above all, women, particularly daughters-in-law, assist older members of farm households.

This finding, however, was not further corroborated by the specific statements related to the intergenerational assistance, which showed no gender difference, particularly in the assessment of the role of genders in the caring for the elderly. So far, we may only speculate about this apparent paradox. At first, it implies a discrepancy between the actual and declarative behaviour of people. Secondly, the expressed similar assessments by gender on intergenerational assistance may also be seen as the indicator of ideology of gender equality, so widely propagated during the times of socialism in Slovenia and afterwards. Finally, this result may be interpreted as the indicator of anticipated change in the position of women on the farm, so increasingly evidenced in the last decade (BRANDTH, 2002; ROSSIER, 2005; BOCK and SHORTALL, 2006; ASZTALOS MORELL and BRANDTH, 2007). However, to verify these assumptions, further research is necessary.

The results confirm the importance of the intergenerational solidarity in the context of unfavourable demographic trends in a farm setting. The results may be conducive to rare domestic and foreign (e.g. MELBERG, 2005) case studies on intergenerational bonds in a farm context. Finally we hope that due to increasing reporting on the importance of family farming and intergenerational solidarity in an aging society, the issue on gender and intergenerational relationships will be more systematically included in the research agenda.

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