

Why are there so few female farm managers? Evidence from eastern Germany

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Abstract - In Germany, the current share of female farm managers is approximately 10%. However, regularly more than 50% of the graduates of agricultural science are female. This discrepancy between qualified supply (female students) and demand (appointed female farm managers) gives rise to the question why the share of female farm managers is so low. The aim of this study is to give insights on the reasons for the paucity of female farm managers. In order to achieve this, seven focus group discussions with agricultural students (n=38) and seven guideline interviews with farm managers were carried out. Results from the focus group discussion and interviews indicate that the paucity of female farm managers stems from both the supply and the demand side. For the supply side, two key reasons for the lack of interest in becoming a farm manager are identified: First, gender specific socialization processes lead to boys being more involved and hence more versed in agricultural work. Second, some female students expect that being a farm manager and having a family will be difficult to combine. For the demand side results indicate that key reasons are beliefs on gender appropriate behavior and the masculine culture in agriculture.

INTRODUCTION

At present, the share of German farms that are managed by female executives amounts to a mere 10% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2011: 121). 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 science are female (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009: 26). This discrepancy between existing qualified female workforce and appointed female farm managers gives rise to the question of what causes the paucity of female farm managers.

Little solid knowledge exists about the factors which lead to the low share of women among farm managers. Empirical evidence suggests that gender-specific socialization leads to gender-specific differences in the individual motivation to take up a family farm management position (e.g. Rossier and Wyss, 2007). "Glass-ceilings" may provide a second explanation why few women have advanced to management positions in agriculture.

Conceptually, the empirical phenomenon of the paucity 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 result from this conceptual perspective: 1) Why do women decide in favor of, or against, taking up farm management positions?

Due to the particularly puzzling discrepancy between the gender distribution of farm managers and agricultural students, this part of the research focuses on agricultural students.

2) Are those who are in charge of hiring future farm managers unbiased "hunters for the best heads" or are they distracted by gender biases?

METHODOLOGY

In order to give insights on the research question for the "supply side", semi-structured focus group discussions with agricultural students were conducted. A pretest was carried out and subsequently questions were adapted. A total of n=38 students (20=female, 18=male) in seven focus groups were interviewed. Discussions took place in the university setting and were conducted by the author. Participants were a mixture of students from the agricultural bachelor and master program of the Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg. Focus group discussions lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and were afterwards verbatim transcribed. Krueger and Casey's (2000) method of focus group discussion data analysis was applied. Here, the focus of the analysis lies on four key factors: frequency, extensiveness, specificity and emotionality of comments.

In order to give insights on the research question for the "demand side", seven semi-structured interviews with farm managers (4=female, 3=male) from family farms as well as bigger agricultural companies in East Germany were carried out. On-farm interviews were conducted by the author and lasted from 30 to 70 minutes. Interviews were verbatim transcribed and analyzed applying the reductive content analysis according to Mayring (2003). This analysis is a stepwise reduction and summarization of collected data.

RESULTS

Results for the "supply side" indicate that male students are far more enthusiastic and determined to become a farm manager. In contrast to this, the vast majority of female students is still undecided about their career plans.

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Most male students grew up on farms and started to help there from an early age on. Only few female students grew up on a farm, and even less helped with on-farm work. The lack of practical experience is often cited by female students as one of the key reasons for not feeling qualified for the job and consequently for not wanting the job.

The vast majority of male students passionately comments on the variety of agricultural and managerial tasks, which a farm manager carries out. They state the enjoyment of these tasks to be their key motivation for wanting to become a farm manager. Female students display considerably less interest in the concrete tasks of a farm manager.

Several female students display anger that having a family will (presumably) collide with the possibility to be a farm manager. No male student evaluates having a family and being a farm manager to be mutually exclusive activities.

By following the successive steps of paraphrasing, generalising and reducing, the results for the "demand side" are the following: On the one hand most interviewed farm managers are eager to deny that there are any gender specific constraints for women in achieving farm manager positions deriving from the "demand side". On the other hand, three out of the four female interviewees report that they had to adapt to the masculine way of behaviour in agriculture in order to be taken seriously by male colleagues and employees. Further all interviewees state that having children and being a farm manager at the same time is hardly possible for women.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the "supply side" support empirical evidence of gender specific socialization leading to farm girls' lack of interest in becoming a farm manager (e.g. Rossier and Wyss, 2006): Parents still integrate sons more into on-farm work and rather assume boys to take over the farm.

The perceived lack of sufficient practical experience of female students influences their evaluations of their capability and intention to carry out the job as a farm manager. These findings are in line with empirical findings, showing that these so-called "self-efficacy" beliefs play a key role in career development and pursuit (Bandura, 1997). Further, theories on career choice highlight that self-efficacy is achieved by successfully carrying out a task, which in turn influences interest (e.g. Lent et al., 1994). This leads to the suggestion that female students' lack of interest is also connected to their lack of practical experience.

Findings from the "demand side" indicate that one of the key constraints, which impede women to advance to farm manager positions, is the predominant belief on gender appropriate behavior: Both male and female farm managers view women to be the primary caretaker of the children. Deriving from this belief, all interviewed farm managers evaluate women to not have the needed flexibility in time, stated to be necessary for being a farm manager. In addition to this, findings from the "demand side" support first evidence from Australia (Pini, 2005), indicating that female farm managers have to be willing and able to adapt masculine behaviour in

order to assert themselves in the agricultural sphere. From this it follows that masculine behaviour is evaluated more positively, which likely leads to a gender biased evaluation of applicants.

The findings from this study can be interpreted as a contribution to the understanding of the low share of female farm managers. The study can also contribute to the development of recommendations aiming at the increase of the share of female farm managers. While on the one hand an increase of female farm managers should be a normative goal, on the other hand it is also an economic necessity: The current shortage of farming specialists and executives (e.g. Winge and Wiener, 2009) calls for the recruitment of all qualified workforce. Results indicate that for an increase of female farm managers, human capacity building on both the "supply" and the "demand side" is necessary.

Nonetheless, the study faces limitation. For instance: The research on the supply side focuses on agricultural students. In order to completely understand the causes of the paucity of female farm manager which stem from the "supply side", it would be necessary to see why other sections of the population (do not) wish to become farm managers. Further, this research does not differentiate between reasons for the paucity of female farm managers in family farms and bigger agricultural businesses. In order to do so, in a next step a quantitative study will be conducted. This will also increase the representativeness of findings here.

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