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Beyond farming women: queering gender, work and family farms

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Abstract
The issue of gender and agriculture has been on the research agendas of civil society organisations, governments, and academia since the 1970s. Starting from the role of women in agriculture, research has mainly focused on the gendered division of work and the normative constitution of the farm as masculine. Although the gendered division of work has been questioned, the idea of binary gender has mostly been taken as a given. This explorative research shifts the attention from the production of (traditional) gender roles to the making and unmaking of binary gender. An ethnographic study of four farms in Switzerland is drawn on to explore queer farming practices and investigate how queer farmers navigate gender normativity and what this tells us about gender in agriculture more broadly. After considering the mechanisms through which queer farmers are discouraged from farming as a livelihood on the basis of their sex, gender or sexuality, this article argues that queer farmers de- and re-construct gender and farming identities differently, which has research and policy implications for a more diverse and resilient rurality.

Keywords Performativity · Agricultural practices · Swiss faming · Ethnographic research · Gender · Queer farmers

Introduction

The issue of gender and agriculture has been on the research agendas of civil society organisations, governments, and academia since the 1970s.[1] Starting from the role of women in agriculture (Whatmore 1991; Bock and Shortall 2006; Shortall 2017), research has mainly focused on the gendered division of work and the normative constitution of the farm as masculine. With women responsible for the household and men for the farm itself. Kohl (1978), for example, noted that while women could legally inherit a farm holding, they were not perceived as successors of the agricultural occupation. However, divisions of work and gender roles are dynamic, and the work of Kelly and Shortall (2002) shows how these are continuously renegotiated.

A rich body of work has promoted interest in the issue of making women visible as farmers (Whatmore 1991). This work, however, has a problematic dimension in its reproduction of gender identities that 'sustain the binary categories of man and woman' and make other gender identities invisible or unspeakable (Butler 1988, 519). It is the presupposition of the categories itself that is questioned here. Through an ethnographic methodology, I[2] explore the everyday life of farmers who reject, resist and bend the binary gender categories, not only in the spaces that they reclaim as theirs but also in those in which they experience the imposition of this gender binary.

This study thus offers an insight into how queer farmers navigate gender normativity and what this tells us about gender in agriculture more broadly. It further questions the construction of binary gender in and through farming practices

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1 See for example the academic contributions of (MacCormack and Strathern 1980) and the rise of the ´Women in Development (WID) paradigm (Farhall and Rickards 2021).
Instutions such as the U.S. Census of Agriculture started including gender on their survey in 1978 (Hoppe and Korb 2013, iv). In Switzerland we had to wait until 2001 to have a first women-specific study. The Food and Agriculture Organisation published a first study focussed on women in agriculture in 1980 (Food and Agriculture Organization and Pakistan 1980) and its first gender action plan reaches back to 1989 (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations 2009).

2 Though this is a co-authored article, data collection was done by the first author. Therefore we had decided to use the 'I' form when referring to the act of data collection.

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and the exclusionary nature in which binary gender determines and is determined by the 'family farm', related policies, and institutions. Drawing from both queer and feminist scholars, this article first problematizes binary understandings of gender, sexualities, sex, farming identities and the family farm. It then goes on to explain the methodology, the approaches and techniques applied in data gathering, analysis and management. It then steps into the domesticated wilderness (queer farms) to understand how—through which practices—gender is continuously (de/re)constructed on and off (queer) farms in Switzerland. It finally looks at how this might open new ways of doing research and understanding gender construction in and through agriculture.

Background

Defined as a wide varieties of practices performed to cultivate land and keep animals to produce food and other products (Harris and Fuller 2014), agriculture is at the same time a cultural practice. It comes with norms on who produces what, when and how. This articulates itself in a gender division of work and labour—on which tasks are considered suitable for men—and so produce masculinity—and for women—and so produce femininity.

This gendered division of work and labour on the farm has led to a questioning of the construction of gender in and through farming practices (Shortall 2014). Sarah Whatmore (1991) gathered these debates around farming and gender in her *Farming Women*, where she looked at how unequal gender relations on family farms are organized around the household and farm work domains, and went on to analyse how gender roles and relationships are continuously (re)shaped and (re)negotiated in and through daily performances. Whatmore uncovered ways in which gender identities are mobilised through routine practices that simultaneously rest on and strengthen the general construction of subordinate women identities, thus effectively masking the exploitative nature of family farming. Her critique of the shortcomings of the classical approach to gender was, however, itself based on a dichotomous understanding of the latter. Most recent contributions continue to (re)produce and naturalise a binary understanding of gender, often lacking a distinction between gender and sex (Bonis-Profumo et al. 2022; Unay-Gailhard and Bojnec 2021).

The feminine in this binary understanding is embodied by the category of the *Bäuerin* in agriculture in Switzerland. In this role, the woman takes care of the farm household, the kitchen garden, and of young calves; she is responsible for processing and direct selling of farm products as well as the administrative aspects of the business. '*Bäuerin*' can be colloquially translated as 'farmer's wife'. The *Bäuerin* is also a recognised profession, however. One can attend a farm management school and gain a diploma to become an officially certified *Bäuerin*. The construction of *Bäuerin* as a feminine profession has thus both a linguistically connotation and a performative nexus: accordingly, it was not until May 2019 that a man first entered and successfully concluded the *Bäuerin* diploma course (Contzen 2019).

*Bauer*s, the masculine, manage the farm business, the fields, and the stables; they use the agricultural machinery and look after the large livestock. The official name for the *Bauer* as a profession is 'the *Landwirt/in' (the farmer)* which is linguistically inclusive of men (*Landwirt*) and women (*Landwirtin*)—and thus of all officially recognised genders as it has been stated and reiterated that '*no third gender category is introduced'* (The Federal Council 2022). *Landwirt/in* are qualified male or female farmers. Of the apprentices who completed the *Landwirt/in* education with a Swiss Federal Certificate of Competence in 2020, 19% were women (Statistik 2021b), up from 2.3% in 1995 (Contzen 2019). Thence has farming in Switzerland been socially, linguistically and formally gendered through historical sex-based roles and more recently established professional training courses.

Research into non-traditional gender roles on farms is very limited and mainly focused on female farm managers (Contzen 2003; Rossier 2005, 2013, 2019; Rossier and Reissig 2015). Against this, research on women's roles in the traditional family in Switzerland is ample, focusing mainly on the unequal gender relations on farms and the *Bäuerin´*s contribution to agricultural production and rural economy (Contzen and Forney 2017; Droz et al. 2014a; Rossier and Reissig 2015).

Contzen and Forney's (2017) study of family farms in the Swiss context examined how inequalities arise and are perceived by different subjects. Most Swiss family-farming enterprises, it was found, are built around the ideas of masculinity and femininity, wherein women 'naturally' take on the reproductive tasks (care work, housework, education, etc.), while men are responsible for productive areas. Despite this gender labour division, the authors assert that inequalities are mainly related to the status on the farm and less to gender as such. Against this, the present article considers how status on the farm is simultaneously anchored in and productive of gender identities—thus taking a perspective previously unconsidered in this field.

In Switzerland, the right to exist of the family farm and its importance for a healthy farming community is reiterated as axiomatic by national legislation, at the very opening of Article 1 of the Federal Law on Peasant Land Law, the *Bundesgesetz über das bäuerliche Bodenrecht* (BGBB 1991). Exactly what a family farm is goes undefined, but it is performatively specified through the routine representation in the media, politics and agricultural organisations of white, abled, heterosexual and cisgender couples with

children. This heteronormative definition of the family is further reinforced by the lack of description of the gender positionality of research subjects by scholars and assumption to apply pre-defined categories on them. In short, there is a lack of queer studies in the area.

Essentially, the smallholding and medium-to-large-size agricultural enterprise in Switzerland is equated to the family farm. Thus, for example, the Swiss Federal Office for Agriculture states that 98% of farms in Switzerland are 'family farms' (FSO 2014). According to the UN definition of the Food and Agriculture Organization, 'Family farming is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and is predominantly reliant on family labour, including both women's and men's' (Garner and de la O Campos 2014). Clearly, this already has the performative effect of excluding non-binary and intersex persons from family labour, as constituents of family farms and agents in the national domain of agriculture more widely.

While most debates on gender in agriculture remain confined within binary framings, others have developed that take constructions of gender—and sex and sexuality—in and through agriculture to be more complex and diverse. Leslie et al. (2019) deconstructed the naturalistic narrative around gender and sexual roles in today's agricultural practices by highlighting queer experiences and researched the relationship between queer farming and agricultural justice. Leslie (2017, 2019) investigated queerness in relation to possible transition pathways towards sustainable and just food systems and the role of sexuality and heteronormativity in agriculture. Most recently Hoffelmeyer (2021) has investigated queer farmers and the role of queerness in how farmers engage in agriculture.

Most research within and into LBTQ farming communities has applied queer theory and highlighted the constraints they face in accessing resources for farming as well as their potential for socio-ecological transitions in and through farming. Here, however, I argue that we need first to acknowledge that agricultural practices on traditional family farms in Switzerland produce masculinity and femininity. Further, departing from Butler's (1988) performativity theory—according to which gender is performative or a 'stylized repetition of acts through time' (p. 519)—I maintain that we need to look at whether and how gender is (de/re)constructed on queer farms. With gender being the main axis along which labour is divided and power relationships are shaped on traditional family farms, this article asks what happens when gender roles are queered. Further, if particular practices are associated with and constitutive of a certain gender identity on the traditional family farm, then how is this in queer farms?

Method of data collections and analytical approach

For this study data has been collected by the first author in the German-speaking region of Switzerland between May and August 2020. I—this is to say, the first author, identified four farms that were either officially (co-)led, legally (co-)owned, and/or inhabited by at least one self-identified queer person.[3] These farms were between ten and fifteen hectares in size, with four-to-eight hectares available for agricultural use. The Swiss national average for agricultural land per farm in 2021 was 21 hectares (Statistik 2021a), while the plot size typically used to determine a smallholding varies between two and ten hectares, so these farms can be categorised as large smallholdings (Garner and de la O Campos 2014, pp. 7–8).

All the farms had been certified as organic by Bio Suisse[4] and featured diverse production areas. They sold animal products as well as vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts and fruits. For anonymisation purposes, I named them after a detail the farmers were proud of or that particularly struck me. The seven people I interviewed—Severin:e,[5] Noemi and Cleo, Stefanie, Curcuma and Maria and Ciliegia—all lived and/or worked on these farms. The four farms were Horn Farm, whose protagonists were Severin:e, Noemi, and Cleo; Forest Farm, featuring Stefanie; Butterfly Farm, with Curcuma and Emma; and the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Farm with Maria and Ciliegia (Fig. 1).

The first farm visits to the Butterfly, CSA, and Forest farms featured a tour of the farm and a meeting that lasted two hours or more. After these first encounters, I left open the possibility for the farmers to leave the research and

[3] 'Queer' is a contested term that is used differently by scholars, activists and more. Given the empirical and ethnographic approach to theory and research, the article does not discuss the term queer with previous scientific studies. What interests me is not the scientific definition of queer, but how the research subjects themselves understand queerness, namely the deviation from the heterosexual and/or cisgender norm.

[4] Bio Suisse is the main organic farming umbrella organisation in Switzerland. It was founded in 1981 and counts a total of 7500 members (organic producers and organic gardeners in Switzerland). Moreover, Bio Suisse certification is extended to more than 2300 operations and producer groups worldwide that comply to the Bio Suisse standards. The products of members and certified producers appear on store shelves under the BIOSUISSE ORGANIC label. By 2022, 17% of Swiss arable land is cultivated according to Bio Suisse standards, and the market share of certified Bio Suisse products in Switzerland is 10%.

[5] *Severin:e* was a research subject (an individual on the farm). In spoken German, the (typically male and female) names '*Severin*' and '*Severine*' have the same pronunciation, with the 'e' at the end indicating a (grammatically) feminine form; as this person wanted a gender-neutral written form for their name, we decided to use the gender:colon form to make it gender-inclusive.

Fig. 1 *Overview of farms and main actors.* (underlined: interviewed subjects, except Emma; non-underlined: cisgender heterosexual persons. In brackets: age range and relationship to other people on the farm)

Horn Farm

- Severin:e (<50 yo)
- Noemi (<50 yo, Severin:e's partner)
- Cleo (<40 yo, employee)
- 3 helpers/tenats (of which 2 are Severin:e biological parents)

Butterfly Farm

- Curcuma (>50 yo)
- Emma (>50yo, Curcuma´s partner)

The CSA Farm

- Maria (<40 yo)
- Ciliegia (>50 yo)
- 4 other main farmers

Forest Farm

- Stefanie (>50 yo)
- Main farmer (Stefanie's wife)
- Two children (<18 yo, biological children)

mailed them a participant consent form. All the queer farmers except Emma agreed to an interview and signed the participant consent form upon my next visit. The first visit to Horn Farm lasted longer, as I worked on the farm straight away and stayed overnight. The Horn farmers then agreed to have me work and study (with) them, so I stayed over and worked for ten days and visited them repeatedly to help them out—and myself (a mixture of researcher curiosity, work pleasure, friendship and a sense of responsibility keeps me still regularly visiting the farm). Eventually, I undertook a total of seven semi-structured interviews—including a free-listing exercise—and one focus group. The interviews were recorded—upon agreement with all concerned subjects—and transcribed. Each transcript was then sent to the research subject, who could review what they had said but also withdraw data. Only one respondent commented on their transcript, which was corrected as needed; none of the interviewees withdrew their data.

I performed ethnographic research (Richards et al. 2018) for the collection of data aiming to understand and build on the perspective of queer farmers on gender, sex and sexuality. Far from being a distant observer, I was part of the conversations on gender, sex and sexuality. For this purpose, I lived and worked on the farms and engaged in informal conversations. Yet it were the informants to decide when, where and how to meet with me and what to share with me. Furthermore, I used structured interviews and focus group, and visited a farming school. Yet, the main method of data gathering was participant and participatory observation, which entailed my partaking in the daily practices of my study subjects. This enabled me to develop a rapport with the interviewees and, over time, reduce the response effects caused by the interviewer-interviewee format. The focus of my observations shifted from summarising the basic practices to identifying task distribution until finally, I inquired about the basis on which tasks were divided. These three steps interlaced and intermingled as the number and detail of practices grew richer.

During fieldwork, I woke up with my research participants at 5.30 a.m. and worked on and off until eight in the evening. The number of hours per day that I would spend with the interview subjects varied from five to eight hours. I cleaned the floors, cooked and ate and washed the dishes. I moved cow and goat herds, cleaned them and their barns and gave them fresh water and fed the calves; my face was licked by the cows and my arms by the calves looking for their milk. I sat on the tractor next to my research participant and enjoyed how tidy the field looked after we collected the grass swaths. I trembled with them when the rain grew stronger and washed the farm road (track) away, and I sweated beside them to repair it with rakes and a pickaxe. In the short breaks and during lunch breaks, I jotted down everything I felt and smelt, tasted, saw and intuited; and in the evening, I expanded my fieldnotes into a diary. After two days, I was exhausted, crying in my room and on the verge of leaving and giving it all up. This too flew into my diary, where my personal notes merged with the methodological and observational notes into a single text.

I coded the interview transcripts as well as the field notes with Atlas.ti. The diary and focus group data were not coded, but excerpts from the diary were included in the results to substantiate statements and give insights into the daily life on a farm, into how much happens, how much one sees, feels, smells. I was able to join Cleo, the apprentice at Horn farm, for one day at the farmers‘ school she was attending (farmers in Switzerland attend

school once a week during their education), where I followed the classes and mingled with the student-farmers.

An analytical starting point of this research around queer farmers' practices in Switzerland has been the refusal of categorisations of performances and discourses into fixed, pre-set analytical groups and assumed trajectories. This was not only necessary to be able to move beyond gender essentialism, which translates into binary thinking and heteronormativity. Categories may also trap researchers along rigid thinking pathways that prevent their looking beyond them; thus, researchers are led to ignore those that do not fit, as Gibson-Graham argue (2014). Contrary to essentialist and determinist perspectives, this research sought to take the perspective of the research subjects, to understand and convey how they make sense of themselves and their world. As an illustration, without my research informants I would never have experienced the day at the farming school where Cleo took me, and which resulted in my growing awareness of the intertwined questions of the educational paths and farming identities.

Through this non-essentialist and non-determinist approach I viewed gender, sex and sexuality as fluid identities which were continually (re)constructed, (re) negotiated and (re)shaped through speech and practices. This allowed me to distinguish the particular acts or practices through which one becomes a man, woman, queer, farmer, farmer's wife. This builds upon Butler's work (1988), in which she claims that gender is performative. This performativity approach allows me to look at bodies and, while recognising their natural or physical existence, investigate how it is through farm practices that gender, sex and sexuality are embodied. It is in this embodiment, that subversion and deviation from heteronormative norms becomes possible.

Results

This study not only showed that the research subjects perceived gender as normative categories to which they did not comply (subsections a and b) but that they also *de-gendered* farming practices and themselves in the farm while being *re-gendered* again outside the farm (subsection c). The farmers distanced themselves from dominant labels, indicating the potential to redefine the predetermined labels with which major society serves them—such as 'family farm', '*Bauer*', '*Bäuerin*', '*Landwirt*', '*Landwirtin*', 'man' and 'woman'. Questioning these labels and the ways in which binary gender is being produced through farming practices, open up the imaginary of doing gender and farming differently.

Navigating the binary: female farmer or farm wife?

'I'd never call myself a "Bäuerin"' is but one example of the prompt answers of the research subjects when asked if they identify as '*Landwirt*', '*Landwirtin*', '*Bauer*', '*Bäuerin*', or something else. To explain the retort in their answers, we need to take a step back. In agriculture, persons perceived as women are quickly assumed to be farmers' wives both inside and outside the agricultural context. In the latter case, people often fail to distinguish farmers' wives (*Bäuerin*) from female farmers (*Landwirtin*); there is a widespread unawareness that these represent two distinct occupations. People in the agricultural context referring to a *Bäuerin*, however, are specifying a woman on the farm who plays the classical female role. My interviewees required and desired precision about the name of their job and their actual activities on the farm. They had often been categorised, put in a box they do not belong in: women can be farmers too, not only farmers' wives. At times, this also represents a political statement, as Severin:e emphasised: 'There are also *Landwirtin*, not only *Bäuerin*'.

The imaginary that comes to the interviewees' minds when the term '*Bäuerin*' is used is one linked to the 'image of the *Bäuerin* in the house and the *Bauer* outside… the term itself is connected to a certain tradition'. Curcuma's statement is reiterated by Noemi, who claims that a *Bäuerin* is 'usually regarded as the wife of a Bauer who lives and works with him on the farm' and explains that it is in 'more of a heterosexual frame that this word is used'.

There is however one exception among my informants; Stefanie does, in fact, identify as a *Bäuerin*. When she tells me this, I struggle to keep my surprise from showing. I explain that all the other interviewees distance themselves from the label '*Bäuerin*' for a number of reasons (which I do not recount). I ask her to explain what a *Bäuerin* and a *Landwirtin* are to her, and she answers thus:

> Because I used to call myself a '*Bauer*' [before coming out as a woman], not a '*Landwirt*'. I was just a *Bauer*, and that's why I'm a *Bäuerin* now.

Simple. And then she adds

> I know that in the past it was called 'the *Bäuerin* school', so, according to that old understanding the *Bäuerin* was like the partner of the Bauer [laughs]. But I understand that a *Bäuerin* is simply a female Bauer. Sure, I understand it that way for myself.

Unfortunately, my research subjects would say, this was wishful thinking. We are not there (yet?), we still have a *Bäuerin* school where the students (defined as ciswomen) learn about 'taking responsibility regarding the needs and expectations of family members, staff and guests'. Then, we have the *Landwirt/in* school, in which, Cleo asserts,

most students live on farms 'with traditional gender relations', meaning 'they don't have to cook, they don't clean, and they never learn that' since 'when they have a farm themselves, either they have a girlfriend who takes over the whole thing or their mother'. Stefanie and I return to the current Swiss agricultural context, and she adds:

> I understand that women say they are '*Landwirtin'* and not '*Bäuerin'* because otherwise, they might be wrongly classified in their professional role.

Along with their strong repulsion in general to the *Bäuerin* label, many interviewees feel the urge to clarify two points. First, none want to 'devalue the profession of the Bäuerin at all, that would be a big misunderstanding' (Severin:e). They value that work, what a *Bäuerin* does also belongs on the farm and is necessary; yet the term does not represent the interviewees' professional area. Severin:e adds, however, that in the final analysis, she also does the *Bäuerin* job (housework, direct selling, administrative work, etc.), so really, she is both a *Landwirtin* and a *Bäuerin*, which only goes to highlight that housework is work and should be recognised as such.

Severin:e's acknowledgement links to the second point: the popular and professional image of a *Bäuerin* does not reflect the occupational profile of a *Bäuerin*, the activities that a *Bäuerin* actually performs on the farm. That is the conclusion to be drawn from the free-listing exercise, when I ask the interviewees to write down in two minutes all the practices performed by a *Bäuerin*, and, when they were finished, ask them to do the same for a *Bauer*. Much more interesting than the results of the free listing, however, are the comments made in conversations that subsequently arise. Severin:e summarises these succinctly:

> I'd claim that the so-called *Bäuerin* actually very often does everything, so she maintains the household and looks after the children, but she also drives the tractor, and she also does the milking, so I have the feeling that in the traditional context there's actually, as is often the case, a system where there is permeability on one side, so the women do everything. But on the other side, it's much less permeable, so far fewer *Landwirt* or *Bauer* actually do household chores or childcare to a serious extent, it is much rarer.

So, the collective imaginary of what a *Bäuerin* does matches the *Bäuerin* education but is very different from the activities that a *Bäuerin* actually performs on the farm. After this reflection Severin:e, Ciliegia, Maria, Curcuma, and Cleo, stop for a moment and add:

> 'Well, maybe I am a Bäuerin after all.*'*

Navigating the binary: who counts as a family farm?

Beside the categorisation of *Landwirtin* or *Bäuerin*, the research subjects struggle against the persistent concept of the family farm as universally defined, represented and imagined (i.e., in terms of the heterosexual family, with children, and a farm succession to family members, traditionally through the male line).

Curcuma and Maria feel completely excluded from 'the family farm', which they perceive as an 'insanely heteronormative image', one in which they really do not have a space. Noemi adds to that, referring to the Federal Act (see background section), how harmful it is to automatically link 'certain qualities of small-scale farming and sustainable agriculture to the family in the sense of heterosexual family'.

Against this, Noemi, Severin:e and Cleo define their farm as a family farm but redefine who is family and who not. Everyone (including farm animals) living, working, and regularly helping on the farm is family, while, in Severin:e's case, this is not the case for all blood siblings—those with whom the exchanges are rare and limited to selling and buying products. Stefanie unreservedly calls the farm a 'family farm', understanding family as 'a bit of a construct'. Even if her family 'falls a bit outside the norm', they still see themselves as a family, 'but no longer as a married couple, maybe that's the difference'. Whilst in the house, living arrangements changed after her coming out—Stefanie moved to the downstairs apartment—on the farm, nothing changed; they are still a family farm.

The discussions around the concept of the family farm are deeply intertwined with farm succession. Access to farmland in general is a hot topic among the research subjects; it was brought up multiple times during our informal conversations. Patrilinear intergenerational farm transfer, which characterizes traditional farming contexts in Switzerland, does hinder (at least, partially) non-cismen access to farmland. Of the four cases studied, Severin:e had inherited Horn Farm but only after it emerged that the older brother that completed the *Landwirt/in* school did not want to farm anymore; Stefanie had inherited Forest Farm when she was perceived as a man (before coming out) and later wrote the farm over to her wife; Butterfly Farm occupies a piece of land leased from a 'big rich m*an'*, and it was Ciliegia's brother who had inherited the farm; and *CSA* Farm was bought from a male farmer by the *CSA* Ltd (and now belongs to the farming business, which includes Maria).

The perceived exclusion of queer people from land access leads us to a first form of exclusionary practice. This can be verbal and non-verbal but either way involves (helps to produce) the invisibility of queer farmers in Switzerland. My experience in preparing this study also attests to the fact that queerness in agriculture remains a nonentity to Swiss academies and institutions. From the research subjects'

perspectives, the reasons for this are complex. On the one hand, the heteronormative impulse of society in general encourages the queer to take avoiding action as a survival strategy of self-protection; on the other hand, the institutional bias operates against queerness in a gender-, sex-, and sexuality-exclusive way, where 'institution' is understood both formally, as a public body, and sociologically, such as the institution of 'the family farm'.

Subverting the binaries

My informants argue that the farming world is imbued with gendered preconceptions that are reiterated and reinforced through verbal utterances—in mundanities and definitions policies and schools—that impose a binary to which they cannot or do not (want to) comply. The consequences of non-compliance are specific discriminations linked to their ways of living their genders, sexes and sexualities.

Severin:e's and Ciliegia are both perceived mostly as women and grew up on a farm where the parents' gender roles were very traditional. Both had male brothers who were supposed to take over the farm one day; they themselves were not taken into consideration. Ciliegia expresses her views on the matter thus:

> As a child, the distribution of roles is, of course, already decisive, I have the feeling, isn't it like that? You're born as the third child, you are younger, and my brother said it quite clearly, he drives a tractor, he learns with the machines and he liked it, and he didn't need me at all for that.

Ciliegia's role was made clear early on in her life; she was to go to the French-speaking part of Switzerland to learn French, do a year's apprenticeship in domestic work and get married. Clearly, there was no question of doing the farmer's education. Ciliegia did do the farmers' education, however, and she did not get married but came out as a lesbian person to her parents and friends—some 25 years ago now. When she told her father she was in love with a woman, he replied, 'You should know that it's not natural'. After this direct attack, she experienced a sense of unease at her various workplaces and during the first year at the farmer school. For example, her classmates 'often talked about others during the break, that they were gay, they were just [derogatory word for gay] or something'. These sorts of homophobic jokes were passed around on several farms she considered working at, and even though Ciliegia does not '*want to insinuate that everyone is homophobic*', she still thinks that in the Swiss farming context, many are.

Maria—who works in a collective with three cis-women and a cis-man—is as good a tractor driver as any cis-man, but her fellow farmers do often not take her seriously when it comes to machines, and other agricultural partners in the region tend to take the man as the boss, the main farmer, the *Bauer*. Maria then goes back in her mind and recalls that it was rather tedious as a woman on the apprenticeship farms. Her lack of previous experience with machines and tractors—due to a feminine socialisation—led to her not being taught what she needed to pass the exams. Her co-workers thought that it would be too much work to teach her how to use the machines*:*

> For example, in the first year of my apprenticeship I only drove the loader wagon in reverse for the first time during the final apprenticeship exam, because no one ever showed me how to do it.

Maria passed the exam.

Severin:e does not say much about the impact of her childhood and youth. Severin:e does say that her parents had a very traditional division of tasks, and they had already made plans for one of her brothers to take over the farm—a plan that did not work out as the brother soon left farming. Severin:e remembers how much more freedom there was during the university studies; gender was important, but Severin:e's gender was not important. Severin:e does not identify as a woman, but is mainly perceived as such:

> So, during my studies at university, I wasn't reduced to my gender, and my gender was somehow more open. Then, I simply noticed that in agriculture, everything is so male-dominated that it was almost important to me to be read as a 'woman'. And that's why I call it a strategic category, I've sort of become more classically feminist again.
>
> But actually, after all, I think gender's just a category that shouldn't be relevant in the way that it is in our current society; on the other hand, I think it has to be relevant as long as people are discriminated against because they are women, so you can't just say that gender doesn't exist.

Severin:e further remembers multiple issues of discrimination around being perceived as a woman, from 'the classic thing about you being a woman and somehow you can't lift heavy stuff' to farms that refuse to have women as trainees because the work there ´would be too hard for them´. Yet Severin:e feels accepted in some (farming) contexts and lately just recounts microaggressions in the form of compliments—Severin:e calls these 'positive discrimination'. For example, despite having been farming for over ten years, Severin:e still receives compliments like 'You can really drive a tractor well!' something that 'You'd take for granted with a man.'

Finally Stefanie, is no longer perceived as a farmer because of her coming-out as a woman. In town, they ask her if she even works on the farm anymore; they have the

impression that she lives privately as a woman and does no longer wants to get her hands dirty. Furthermore, as Stefanie makes clear, she has lost authority and credibility through her transition:

> [W]hen, for example, I want to book an external contractor, in the past [when perceived as a man], it was clear, it was binding… Now I notice that I've fallen behind in the hierarchy as a woman.
>
> Yes, it is difficult now… Before the transition, the advisor used to say, 'Yes, ok, that's good, and do you still have questions? Ok', and now it's 'Remember, you really must do this and that'. In the past, there was trust that I would do all this, and now, probably because I'm a woman, I'm not credible, or I lack the knowledge. It's really noticeable that they still have to add 'Remember, you have to do this and this and this.'

Stefanie had performed for more than 40 years as a man, been married and had two children before she came out as a woman and decided to go through the hormonal and surgical gender confirmations. The loss of credibility as a farmer that comes with being a woman was exacerbated by being perceived as a transwoman. Stefanie notices how a silence developed around her, how she lost friends and people who had liked her as a person but could not handle her coming out and distanced themselves. The trans-thematic became a problem for her children, too, who were initially bullied at school—although now people had 'got used to it a bit', and it was 'no longer such an issue'.

To achieve this, Stefanie had to become partly invisible; for example, she no longer drove her son to Swiss Wrestling training:

> Now, for example, our son, he's in a Swiss Wrestling association, and the club is two villages away. We have to drive him there because it's a bit much to cycle himself to the training. And this is now a case where I never drive him, simply because the Swiss wrestling scene is very conservative and we don't want to confront our son, a youngster, with the fact that my trans theme could be a problem.

Direct verbalisation, such as mobbing of the specific person or their family members is only one part of violence that affects the interviewees and remains the exception and only a minor part—in terms of frequency—of the violence faced. Much more extensive and insidious is the background noise of jokes about queerness, the homophobic comments and behaviours that make queer people feel unwelcome and the discursive annihilation of queerness in agriculture that triggers a wider sense of exclusion.

And here, allow me a little excursus on my own experience as a participant-observer. The day I spent at the farmers' school with Cleo, left me deeply upset. The only persons I identified as women during the day were serving lunch in the cafeteria, and teachers reinforced binary gender roles through jokes around mothers cleaning clothes and videos featuring men and big machines. At the end of the day, I wrote in my personal diary, 'Went to school with Cleo. Drained my energy. The patriarchy, being treated like an object. An outsider you talk about but not with. Need to restore and be alone. Now in my room calming down. I want to go home…'.

Maria and Cleo report similar experiences of not fitting in and homophobic jokes during their first year at the farmer's school. Maria describes the agricultural world as a 'super heteronormative conservative environment' that completely excludes queer people. She is happy that her farm is different, and she 'can also help people who [otherwise] would never set foot on a farm, access farming as a livelihood or a hobby'. On her farm, she now feels at ease, but there are still topics discussed at lunch from which she feels excluded, such as 'having children, and being heterosexual and [in] a family'. Against the negative aspects, however, Maria also feels that lesbianism is sometimes an advantage in a farming context. The fact that she lives alone and not with a traditional heterosexual family allows her to be taken seriously as a farmer colleague, she says.

Besides the homophobic jokes and heteronormative discourses, queer farmers do not know what the farming community says about them. Severin:e feels that 'otherwise'—meaning despite being perceived as a lesbian woman—they are 'more or less well accepted and taken seriously', which is also due to the fact that Severin:e is not a complete stranger, having grown up on the farm that she inherited and manages well. Maria would sometimes 'also like to know what the other farmers say' but soon changes her mind and adds that 'Maybe it's good that I don't know'. Curcuma, in contrast, thinks that she and her partner are admired in town for running the farm without men.

The successful navigation of what are perceived as 'heteronormative conservative environment[s]' consists in the creation of queer farms, where norms are troubled, subverted and expanded.

Discussion

This research discussed how relationships are shaped, identities created, and work divided among farmers when traditional gender roles are agitated. The research shows a gradient gender construction. in which *inside* the queer farm, queer farmers may be *outside* of gender, while *outside* the farm, they are *inside* gender.

Inside the queer farm: queerness is de-queered

The present article departs from Whatmore's (1991) *Farming Women*, which locates the (implicitly heterosexual) marriage tie as the base and source of patriarchal gender relations wherein traditional femininity is ascribed to women who perform as wives, mothers, and homemakers while traditional masculinity is ascribed to men in the role of the main farmer. Thence, girls grow up as daughters, sisters and family-carers, to later marry and become family-makers, or else stay home to look after the [grand]parents; men, meanwhile, are required to enter the world of work, society and power. The research results reported here, however, suggest that the heterosexual marriage tie is not the source of patriarchal gender relations; rather, this is supplied by the binary construction of gender, in turn supported by compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 1988), that informs marriage ties.

As indicated by the results reported (above), sex, gender and sexuality are continuously performed and co-constructed as binary in and through (agri)culture in Switzerland (hence, outside the queer farm). This co-construction contributes to the legal and practical recognition of only two genders (men and women) and two sexes (male and female) and the naturalisation of the link between gender, sex, and sexuality based on core characteristics treated as paradigm and then fixed as facts. Thus, female bodies are 'naturally' ascribed femininity and attraction to cismen, and male bodies are ascribed masculinity and attraction to ciswomen. This is the case in rural sociology research in Switzerland, too (see e.g., Contzen 2003, 2019; Contzen and Forney 2017; Droz et al. 2014a, b; Gremaud 2019; Rossier 2005; Rossier and Reissig 2014, 2015).

The research subjects' biographies show us how the *outside*—perceived as the heteropatriarchal Swiss farming space—impregnated and co-constituted their mind and bodies, normalising the interests they were to develop, the knowledge they were to acquire, and the bodies that were imaginable. Thus, during their early years, persons perceived as men (generally due to their ascribed sex at birth) tend to acquire a slightly different knowledge base for life than persons perceived as women do. Of course, an 'alternative' performance—showing interest in gender-non-normative domains—does have the potential, at least, to enable a wider experience and access to the 'other' gender's knowledge—but this is really quite limited in agricultural contexts, which are typically quite conservative. Queering the farm is not at all 'natural'.

Yet, traditional gender ideologies are undone *inside* queer farms, thus opening the discussion to an enhanced understanding of the modes of deconstruction of gender roles, constructs and inequalities. Queerness is central to the performative constitution of the farm as a gender- and sexuality-neutral space. Regarding queer scholarship, this research argues that gender is not relevant inside—on the queer farm—but is extremely important outside. When queerness is the norm, it is no longer very queer (from the inside); hence, the inside queerness is de-queered. Queerness itself then becomes a heteronormative category only performed on the *outside*. We saw in the results section how, faced with the realities of agricultural life, Severin:e chooses to become a woman, thus essentialising the women category, like Whatmore (1991) and second-wave feminists (Butler 1988), but as a performance, for political ends. At the same time, however, and throughout the fieldwork, the research subjects also tended to resist gender and sexual categories—for example, by evading questions and challenging (my) gender assumptions.

Through queerness, queer farmers and their networks start to interrogate and performatively disrupt the link between gender, sex and sexuality. This questioning is consequently brought into their mundanity, whereby the linkage between their gender and their practices is questioned, too. The construction of the queer farm bubble as a gender and sex-neutral space thus starts with the individual and collective conscious and subconscious re-examination(s) of the links between gender, sex and sexuality and continues with the active avoidance of traditional gender roles.

Yet, Ciliegia challenges my statement in and through her self-questioning: has her constant rebellion against the lifepath she was assigned when she was ascribed femaleness and femininity, in turn, influenced her sexuality? Did Ciliegia's lesbian identity lead her to refuse traditional gender roles, or did the refusal of traditional gender roles make her question the links between gender, sex and sexuality? Here, again, a post-structuralist approach challenges us to go beyond the binary. It is rather that Ciliegia's sexual, farming, gender and sex identities were co-constructed in and through time and experience whereby a non-traditional farming role intertwined and emerged with a non-traditional sexuality and gender expression. They emerged together, defining each other, like a dance, like the strands of a double-helix co-constituting their own DNA—which is why they cannot really be separated.

It follows from this that queerness is not in itself a prerogative giving carte blanche to undoing or doing gender otherwise but that it does encourage a further undermining and ongoing review or re-discussion of the naturalised links between gender, sex, sexualities and farming practices, which in turn seems to lead to enhanced gender equality.

Queering the outside

In Switzerland, rural sociology research has investigated how inequalities arise and are perceived by different subjects on family farms (Contzen & Forney 2017), how social logics are constructed and mobilised through

farming practices (Droz et al. 2014a) and how gender prescripts are at the basis of inequalities (Droz et al. 2014b). In these studies, much like Whatmore's (1991), what counts as a family and family farm has generally not been problematised. Thus, it has been implicitly defined in the assumptions made by researchers, and traditional, white, heterosexual Swiss family farms have provided the locus of research, leaving heterosexual and cisgender privileges untouched (along with those of race, class, etc.). More recently, queer scholars have criticised feminist scholarship for overlooking how compulsory heterosexuality and cisgenderity shape the family farm narrative and our food system (Hoffelmeyer 2020; Leslie et al. 2019).

It has already been noted (in the background section) that the importance of family farms for healthy rural communities and food production is engraved in the Swiss Federal Act. The assumptions in the Act thus imply questions about the idea of a family farm and who can identify with this narrative. My research shows how the family farm narrative may, in fact, be keeping potential farmers away from farming—by making non-heteronuclear and non-traditional families feel excluded. Curcuma and Maria, for example, refuse the 'family farm' label as it is too far from their queer realities—it is too heterosexist, too exclusionary. Maria thus needs to distance herself from it, a distancing itself performed by her characterisation of its 'insanely heteronormative image'.

The lack of official recognition of the reality of queer farming goes to reconfirm previous findings around the heteronormative nature of the family farm narrative (Leslie 2019) and how 'the family farm category is analytically inept at offering useful observations about the ecological outcomes of these farms' (Hoffelmeyer 2020, p 352). Consequently, the relevant part (1[1][a]) of the Federal Law (BGBB 1991) must be modified so that all sustainable farmers feel included and supported, that they, too, are constituents of a healthy farming community.

I further argue that the potential of queer farmers to redefine the predetermined labels that major society serves them with ('family farm', '*Bauer/in*', '*Landwirt/in*', 'wo/man') has been overlooked. The results of this research show that we can no longer ignore how queer farmers feel included or include themselves, how they expand the family farm narrative to include non-normatively defined families—where these are not only non-heterosexual and non-cisgender families but also families that construct their kinship away from sexual and marriage bonds. Stefanie, in fact, unreservedly calls their farm a 'family farm', thus extending the family label to embrace separated spouses and trans parents, while Noemi, Severin:e and Cleo redefine family altogether by expanding it beyond marriage, blood ties and humans to cover all those who help on the farm and farm animals. Insofar as vitality is born of diversity—socially as well as ecologically—such an incorporation is surely the very definition of a healthy community.

Queer farmers thus show us new ways to construct family farms, even with new ontologies evaluating non-blood-related humans as family and animals in terms of personhood. They certainly confirm Butler's (2004, p 26) statement that 'kinship ties that bind persons to one another may well be no more or less than the intensification of community ties'. In other words, what is at issue is not just the family—and its farm—but the idea of community and the wider society—and its health, through close ties as well as through diversity and the inclusion of animals.

This redefinition and reappropriation of 'family farm' that goes beyond the sex, gender and sexuality binaries is not a simple matter. It involves an appropriation of (farming) roles and performances parallel to that of the family (farm). It deconstructs farming, sex, gender and sexual categories in and through the usage of the farmer, farmer's wife and other (e.g., peasant) categories in combination with sex-gender-sexual categories when queer farmers go outside the queer farm.

The going outside is conceptual, of course; sometimes it may be literally enacted, when physically leaving the farm, but other times the outside may enter (in the form of people, virtual communications, etc.), inherently threatening (as dominant), commonly denting (as aggressive) and sometimes temporarily bursting the bubble. Equally, deviants, transgressives and alternatives undermine and challenge socio-cultural norms directly and indirectly by performing an opposition and queering norms, both through their actions and by their very being, which stands as implicit threat to the hegemony. Queer persons uncover how gender functions as a social and performative construct. The deconstruction occurs in three ways.

First, the masculine and heterosexual connotations of the term 'farmer' may be lost, for example when Maria performatively and verbally reclaims a farmer, farmer's wife, queer and woman's identity. Second, the binary understanding of farming identities is deconstructed through the performative appropriation of the identities of both the male or female farmer and the farmer's wife by the same person at the same time (Severin:e, Maria and Stefanie)—which is reinforced by the assertion that farmer's wife has basically always been a farmer but subjugated by possession, ascribed with femininity and assigned somewhat different responsibilities (for the household, garden, childrearing, administration, and direct marketing, not for vehicles, machinery, etc.).

Third, in much the same way, the peasants, farmers' wives and fe/male farmers are suddenly both (either) homosexual and heterosexual, female and male, cisgender and non-binary. In sum, sex-gender-sexual categories give visibility to farming women and queer farmers who—by labelling themselves 'lesbian', 'trans/women', etc. and performing

farming practices conventionally ascribed to heterosexual cismen or ciswomen—open up the imaginary of conservative farming contexts to create space(s) for more queer persons to farm. Thus, through their discursive and performative acts, queer farmers expand the possibilities of both conservative and queer environments; they demonstrate that queer people can and do navigate the 'super heteronormative conservative environment' of Swiss farming. In fact, through queer performances, all sex-gender-sexual binaries are already blurred.

Conclusion

At the outset of this article to offer new insights into how queer farmers navigate gender normativity and what that tells us about gender in and through agriculture more widely. By participating, observing, describing and analysing the daily practices of selected queer farmers—seven persons on four farms—I have shown how genders and sexualities of the research subjects recorded here are at the same time both a source of trouble and yet also appropriated and celebrated to state that gender, sex and sexuality are performative social constructs and not prescriptive for farming practices or farming sex-gender-sexual identities. In fact, it has emerged that farming can also be an accommodating space—the insides—where people can become who they want to be.

First, this research has shown how gendered socialisation can play a troubling role in defining task division on farms. Gender and sex/ual queerness hampers this through the absence of cismen and a raised awareness of such troubles. Practices and relationships of queer farmers in Switzerland become de- and non-gendered as the gender prescriptions are actively avoided on the farm through the construction of an 'inside' (the queer farm as enclosed environment) where gender is undone and not done. A direct effect and complementary corollary of this deconstructive construction is that practices and relations become recognised, revealed and felt as extremely gendered 'outside' the queer farm.

Second, this research has shown how the effect of queer farmers' discourse and performance is hampered by their lack of visibility. Academies and institutions are not paying attention and are still performatively silencing gender and sexual queerness in farming contexts. Not only is the perspective of queer persons in agriculture omitted, but heterosexism in farming schools and other institutions remains hidden and unquestioned, with all the disadvantages of doing queerness and farming in heteronormative contexts that this implicitly condones and thus actively entails.

As the case from Switzerland shows, academies and institutions have a further role to play here. Their responsibility is to be more reflexive of their role in perpetrating the heteronormative bias. It is time for rural sociology to attend to and theorise about performances in and through which gender, sex, sexuality, and farming identities are subverted and how and when these performances may lead to more egalitarian agriculture and food systems and take even society as a whole towards greater justice. As a pragmatic or policy, our societal aim should then be to facilitate an expansion of the inside that queer farmers construct so that sustainable farmers can practice agriculture, live, love and thrive independently of their gender, sex and sexuality.

Third, the results of this research point towards the need to stop 'legislating for all lives what is liveable only for some and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unliveable for some' (Butler 2004, p 8). Referring to the first part of the sentence, it is evident that legislation, education and the ways farmers are prepared to farm are biased towards cis-heteronuclear family farms based on notions of gender complementarity and compulsory heterosexuality. These are practices that actively co-construct lifelong binary genders. As this study (once again) shows, (farming) practices create zero, one, two, many genders: non-binarity is a reality that cannot—indeed must not—be ignored.

As long as these realities are not recognised, some queer farmers will proceed like Severin:e. First, they understand the ontological insufficiency of the category of woman, as there is no such thing as an essential woman nor a women perspective. And second, they use this category to bring about political change (Butler 1988), to make the claim that women and queer persons can be farmers too, to undo the traditional linkage between farming practices, gender and sexuality—and maybe, one day, to undo gender itself.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest.

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