"Small is Beautiful"

The Responses of Women Organic Farmers to the Crisis in Agriculture

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Se basant sur une récente étude, l'auteure explore la division selon les genres dans l'agriculture biologique au-delà des limites de la ferme. Elle attire notre attention sur une comparaison entre le capital/vie et le capital/argent. L'agriculture industrielle qui accentue le déficit du capital/vie fait dire à l'auteure qu'il est temps d'établir des politiques sur la contribution des agricultrices biologiques, à la fois sur la ferme et dans les communautés rurales.

The crisis in agriculture can be described as a chronic set of problems associated with the rise of industrial agriculture—large-scale, capital-intensive, and highly mechanized "factories in the field" (McWilliams) promoted by government policy at all levels. The increased use of purchased chemical inputs to replace hands-on management, the consolidation of farmland under the ownership of large, absentee corporations, the fall of world prices for basic food commodities, and the bankrupting tendencies of the so-called technological treadmill have all contributed to a downward spiral for small and medium-sized farms, farm families, and farming communities. Working with Statistics Canada data, the National Farmers Union reported that the realized net farm income on the average farm in Canada was essentially zero.

As farmers struggle to cope in a failing farm economy, rural women experience the crisis in particularly gendered ways. In farming communities, women work off the farm more and more just to make ends meet, adding a third responsibility to the already large dual load of home and farm work. In addition, the constant stress of debt and uncertainty has lead to increased levels of alcoholism, wife and child abuse, and suicide (Sumner 2005). And as farms fail, the communities that depend on them fail, resulting in school and hospital closings, withdrawal of social services, and the demise of local business, all of which have multiple implications for rural women.

In the face of the twin crises in agriculture and rural community sustainability, one group of rural women is responding in ways that revive the small and medium-sized farm, support rural communities and prioritize the environment—they are taking up organic farming. According to the 2001 Census in Agriculture, one-third of all self-declared organic farm operators in Canada are women. This statistic has the potential to change the face of modern agriculture from a "classed, raced, and gendered project that produces inequality, hunger and environmental degradation" (McMahon 204) to a way of life that creates spaces for rural women, bears a social-justice agenda, and embodies an environmental consciousness. It also helps to modify the very meaning of the term "farmer."

Traditionally, women who lived on farms were designated as farm wives, which "defines them primarily in relation to their husbands rather than emphasizing their relation to their children, as in "farm mothers," or stressing their relation to the farm, as "farm women" or "farmers" (Sachs 134). The growth of alternative visions of agriculture opens up a more inclusive meaning for the term farmer, allowing it to encompass the roles of women (and of children) on the farm. within organic agriculture, this more inclusive meaning is reflected in women seeing farming not only as a way to make a living, but also as a means of connecting with customers and sharing with them the values and lifestyles involved in alternative agriculture (Chiappe and Flora) and in farming being about feeding community and building relationships (McMahon). Such a meaning also moves the definition of organic farming beyond the narrow confines of productionism to encompass wider socio-political realities. In the words of Stuart Hill and Rod MacRae:

> organic farming comprises a range of approaches within the broader sustainable agriculture

system. In its most developed form, ecologically sustainable agriculture (including organic farming) is both a philosophy and a system of farming. It is based on a set of values that reflect an awareness of both ecological and social realities, and on a level of empowerment that is sufficient to generate responsible action. (72)

Using data from a study I conducted in 2003 this article will explore the gendered division of labour in organic agriculture beyond the farm gate, focusing attention on the types of capital that contribute to life capital, as opposed to money capital, formation.

Women see farming not only as a way to make a living, but also as a means of connecting with customers and sharing with them the values and lifestyles involved in alternative agriculture.

Small is Beautiful

In a recent study of organic farmers in southwestern Ontario, 41 organic farmers were systematically selected from a membership list supplied by a farming organization] and contacted: ten were women organic farmers and 31 were men. They participated in open-ended, informal interviews in their homes, based on an identical interview schedule, which lasted from one to three hours. The results of the study reveal a type of agriculture not driven by the destructive growth imperative associated with corporate globalization. In contrast to the "get big or get out" demands of industrialization, the ethos of this alternative form of agriculture is captured by a simple sign that hangs over the barn of an organic dairy farm: "Small is Beautiful." Working from a life-values perspective, the women and men organic farmers in this study build what can be called life capital in a world obsessed with increasing financial returns. Do women organic farmers build life capital differently than men, and if so, how? While the sample is small, it points to the potential for organic farming to become a more equitable occupation than conventional farming traditionally has been.

Life-Capital Formation and Women Organic Farmers

Many people, including Karl Marx, have equated capital with money. But the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines capital as "wealth in any form used to help in producing more wealth" (334). Philosopher John McMurtry has refined this basic understanding of capital by using the term "life capital," which he defines as "life-wealth that produces more wealth not just by sustaining it, but by '*value-adding*' to it through providing more and better life goods." Life goods include such means of life as breathable air, nutritious food, clean water, adequate shelter, healthcare, vibrant communities and healthy ecosystems.

Thus life capital formation, based on life-wealth that creates more life-wealth, can be an important component of any agricultural policy intent on helping farmers face the crises in agriculture and rural community sustainability, as opposed to the current objective of expanded sales in the global market. Re-appropriating the term capital from economists, and giving it a life-values orientation, means it can work on behalf of farmers, farm families, and rural communities by creating forms of individual and community life-wealth that sustain themselves over time—the essence of any good form of capital. As pioneers in a new agricultural paradigm (Sumner 2003a), do women organic farmers contribute to this kind of life-capital formation differently than men who are organic farmers.

Financial Capital Formation

Financial capital is often mistakenly identified with capital itself. From a life-values perspective, financial capital would have a place in life-capital formation, as long as it was steered or regulated to produce and distribute goods which enable rather than disable life systems (McMurtry). Like other forms of life-capital, it would be one of the ways for individuals and communities to build individual and collective life-wealth to sustain themselves over time.

Women organic farmers in this study contribute to life-capital formation by building financial capital in a number of ways. Like their male counterparts, they engage in a number of small business ventures: Ten per cent of the women organic farmers interviewed participate in Community Supported Agriculture projects (compared to 16 per cent of the men), while 60 per cent of them supply local shops and restaurants (similar to 58 per cent of the men). Women organic farmers in the study also engage in a variety of direct sales: 20 per cent of them sell at farmers' markets (compared to ten per cent with men), 20 per cent also sell produce at the farm gate, farm store or farm produce stand (as opposed to 32 per cent of the men) and ten per cent sell to family, friends or local farmers (while 36 per cent of the men did). When it comes to financially supporting their rural communities, 100 per cent of the women organic farmers interviewed make a point of purchasing both farm supplies and household needs as locally as possible (with men close behind at 94 per cent). They patronize local feed mills, shop at nearby supermarkets, buy from regional organic suppliers, and spend money at local health-food stores. In

this way, both women and men organic farmers contribute not only to their own financial capital, but also to the financial capital of their rural communities, adding to the common-wealth that helps communities survive. Most differences are within ten percentage points, with the exception of women engaging in fewer direct sales to family, friends, or local farmers than men. Although beyond the bounds of this study, such an exception may be due to the women's involvement in what has been called the gift economy (see, for example, "Feminists for a Gift Economy").

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Social Capital Formation

Ben Fine argues that social capital seems to be able to be anything—from public goods and networks to culture, the only proviso being that it should be attached to the economy in a functionally positive way for economic performance, especially growth (5). Robert Putnam moves beyond the growth imperative, arguing that social capital "refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (67). Putnam's meaning opens the term to a life-values perspective, as long as the social organization enhances life systems.

Women organic farmers in the study contribute to life-capital formation by building social capital in a number of ways. First, like their male counterparts, they all build networks with each other by joining alternative agriculture groups that provide support, learning environments, leadership opportunities, and contacts with other organic farmers. Women organic farmers in the study also build networks with their communities. Seventy per cent of them belong to a local club or organization (similar to 68 per cent of the men), and 70 per cent of them volunteer in their local community (while 81 per cent of the men volunteered). Second, both women and men organic farmers work from a common philosophy that stresses norms of social behaviour that they abide by: environmental stewardship, localism, co-operation, sharing, and counter-hegemonic practices (such as refusing to conform to the industrial form of agriculture). Third, women organic farmers in the study build social trust on a number of levels. For example, 70 per cent of them build trust among neighbours through acts of neighbourliness, such as fixing machinery and helping in times of disaster (compared to 65 per cent of the men). Overall, the study suggests that the contributions of women and men organic farmers to social capital formation in their rural communities are similar, falling within approximately ten percentage points of each other.

Human Capital Formation

Like other kinds of capital formation, human capital formation has been focused on economic growth. Even human capital development among rural women has been ultimately tied to the market. Thus Jill Findeis argues that investment in the human capital of rural women "will pay off for society only if this human capital can be productively used to increase the earnings of women" (184). Untying human capital from economic growth and linking it to life-capital formation opens up its potential to enable life systems.

Women organic farmers in the study contribute to life-capital formation by building human capital in a number of ways. All women organic farmers interviewed, like all of the men, participate in learning organizations that offer participants opportunities to speak, mentor, lead, and educate. As one of the new social movements (Sumner 2003b), which also includes the feminist movement, the organic farming movement presents a full-fledged challenge to corporate globalization and allies with other social movements that share a set of values centred on the preservation and enablement of life. It also instantiates Sara Evans and Harry Boyte's (cited in Campbell) description of a social movement's maturing democratic capacity by including diverse interests, spreading activity to new contexts, articulating public purposes, developing public skills, and creating vertical and horizontal connections. In addition, the organic farming movement exemplifies Jean Cohen's description of movements which "consciously struggle over the power to socially construct new identities, to create democratic spaces for autonomous social action, and to reinterpret norms and reshape institutions" (690). In this way, it forges opportunities for human-capital formation, especially for rural women. For example, women organic farmers hold the majority of executive positions in organic farming organizations at the local, provincial, national, and international levels. This situation reflects the movement's grassroots origins and adherence to women's views of farming as so much more than production for profit, and women have used the human-capital opportunities provided by the movement to reach positions of power within it and continue to shape its future in their image of farming.

Natural Capital Formation

Like other forms of capital, natural capital is often tied to the economy. For example, Dan McGrath defines natural capital as "the totality of natural systems that provide ... human beings with tangible and intangible goods and services that have economic value" (1). On the other hand, Herman Daly does not tie natural capital to the economy, preferring instead a more general understanding of natural capital as "the stock that yields a flow of natural services and tangible natural resources" (30). Daly's understanding of the term opens it up to a life-values perspective, as long as the services and resources enable life systems.

Women organic farmers in the study contribute to life-capital formation by building natural capital in a number of ways. Like all organic farmers, they do not use synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, thus lowering the chemical burden on the environment. Eighty per cent of women organic farmers also sell their produce locally (as do 90 per cent of the men) and 70 per cent support local environmental initiatives (compared to 81 per cent of the men). In addition, 100 per cent of both women and men organic farmers followed guidelines on waste management, 90 per cent of women followed guidelines on soil management (compared to 100 per cent of men) and 100 per cent of women belonged to or supported a group or association promoting environmental issues (compared to 94 per cent of men). Interestingly, 70 per cent of women organic farmers contact their political representatives regarding environmental issues (unlike 42 per cent of the men), and 90 per cent of them speak to local groups about environmental issues (as opposed to 61 per cent of men). In terms of overall natural capital formation, the study shows that both men and women are within approximately ten percentage points of each other in most categories, except women clearly communicate much more on environmental issues than men do.

Cultural Capital Formation

Cultural capital refers to the acquisition of social status through cultural practices, and can sometimes be exchanged or converted into economic capital and vice vera (Jackson). By taking a life-values perspective, we can broaden our understanding of cultural capital to include wealth that creates wealth for life systems. This collective life-wealth, instantiated in habits, beliefs, norms, values, and symbols, forms the backdrop and daily reminder of rural culture.

Like most organic farmers, women organic farmers in the study contribute to life capital by building cultural capital through not only adding to the symbolic importance of the image of the rural countryside, but also changing that image into reality. Their farms are family owned and often small. Their farming practices strive for biodiversity, include livestock, protect woodlands, streams and wildlife, support local towns and encourage visitors. Their organic philosophy allows them to revive a dying rural heritage and showcase it as a vital contribution to the cultural life of rural areas. Women organic farmers in the study also build cultural capital by participating in the cultural life of rural communities. Seventy per cent of them attend fall fairs, go to plays and recitals, and participate in church-led projects (compared to 80 per cent of men). In this way, the study suggests that the contributions to cultural capital of women and men organic farmers are similar, within ten percentage points.

Civil Capital Formation

Civil capital (Sumner 1999) involves civil solidarity that arises from and contributes to community sustainability. Avowedly political, civil capital is communal and builds bridges within communities as well as on a national and international level.

Women organic farmers in the study contribute to life-capital formation by building civil capital in a number of ways. Seventy per cent of them participate in local roundtables, panels and protests (compared to 55 per cent of men), and 70 per cent engage with local government in some way (as do 68 per cent of men). However, their involvement in local elections is low, *other than voting*: twenty per cent of women organic farmers participate in the run-up to elections, while 36 per cent of men do. In this way, both women and men organic farmers in the study build civil capital, although in different ways: while both groups engage with local government, women tend to participate in the less formally structured, more network-oriented forums of roundtables, panels and protests while men tend to participate in the more formally structured forum of elections. This finding is in line with Martha Ackelsberg's contention that politics—the web of activities in which people engage out of concern generated in their daily lives—is, for many women, community life. The bridges that women organic farmers build in their communities through civil capital formation contribute to life capital and, ultimately, to community sustainability. But this sustainability will

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not be fully realized if rural women continue to experience restrictive roles within their home spaces.

Conclusion

In their baseline study of all organic farmers in Ontario, Alan Hall and Veronika Mogyorody (2002a) determined that *within the farm gate*, the division of labour and decision-making on most organic farms was similar to conventional farms, although ideological orientation played a substantial role in whether farmers organized their work in different ways. In their view,

> the gender potential of organic farming may not be realized unless there is a more concerted effort by committed alternative organic farmers and consumers to work to preserve organic farming, not only as an alternative agricultural movement, but also as a social justice movement dedicated explicitly to gender equality. (12-13)

In recent years, alternative organic farmers and consumers have formed powerful alliances within the organic farming movement to promote organics from both the production and consumption ends of the food chain (e.g., Field to Fork, Terra Madre). In addition, the International Federation of Organic Farming Movements has moved beyond production issues to develop, through a lengthy participatory process, international principles of organic agriculture, which include fairness and equity. These concerted efforts are laying a firm foundation for the realization of the gender potential of organic agriculture.

The current study looks at the daily life of organic farmers *beyond the farm gate* and reveals, with some notable exceptions, that women and men organic farmers contribute to life-capital formation in similar ways. According to the data, women organic farmers participate as robustly and as diversely as men when it comes to building life capital in rural communities. Although the sample is small, it may point to important trends. As the number of organic farmers reaches a critical mass, further studies will be needed to more fully understand whether women organic farmers' committed engagement within community can, in turn, begin to change the gender order on the farm itself, resulting in more balanced divisions of labour and decision-making, and living up to the international principles of organic agriculture. In the words of Hall and Mogyorody, "organic farming has the potential to alter gender relations in agriculture" (2002a: 11). The ways in which this can be achieved, they suggest, is through creating a labour process context in which women can more readily participate in farm production and management, and through introducing and promoting alternative ways of thinking that are more consistent with gender equality.

To practise organic agriculture means to engage in an alternative way of life. Organic farmers have to think, feel and act differently than conventional farmers in order to survive. In this way, the very transformative potential of organic agriculture allows it to be a springboard for different ways of engaging with the world, including gender relations. Conventional agriculture has been highly gendered, with male identity conflated with the role of farmer (Chiappe and Flora) and women usually confined to certain support tasks such as bookkeeping, running errands, and making and transporting meals for their spouses and workers (Hall and Mogyorody 2002a). Organic agriculture, as a way of life and a social movement, carries the potential to move beyond such rural traditions and call into question not only environmentally destructive production practices but also socially restrictive gender roles.

The transformative potential of organic agriculture, however, cannot be realized by the actions of rural women alone. It is also dependent on alliances with the feminist movement (Hall and Mogyorody 2002a) and enlightened public policy. Agricultural policy that encourages organic agriculture can also help to open up the spaces where rural women can begin to address entrenched gender orders.

In Canada, unfortunately, the life-capital initiatives of women organic farmers take place in a policy void. In tune with the dominant growth imperative,

> the conduct of public policy can best be described as GDP-driven.... This philosophy is flawed, both for what it measures and what it does not ... [and] represents a narrow and unsustainable world-view. (McMurtry and Bultz 699)

Canadian public policy promotes high-input industrial agriculture that specializes in exports, and has a long-standing commitment to move farmers off the land to facilitate the expansion of large, corporate farms (Epp). In terms of organic farming, Hall and Mogyorody (2002b) explain how the federal and Ontario governments did virtually nothing until the late 1990s. Even now, government policy statements and funding programs remain focused on sustaining farmers' commitment to industrial agriculture rather than encouraging a shift to organic farming. Hall and Mogyorody conclude that, from a policy perspective, it is as if organic farming did not exist. Such life-blind policy renders the lives of rural women who are organic farmers invisible, and closes down spaces where the gender order could be changed. Given the life-capital deficits caused by industrial agriculture, it is time that agricultural policy reflected the contributions that women organic farmers provide, both to farming and to farm communities. Instead of supporting a form of agriculture that undermines both ecological and hu-

man life, and staunchly maintains the traditional gender order, agricultural policy should champion the kind of farming that supports life systems and opens up opportunities for changing gender relations by building what Helena Norberg-Hodge refers to as "small scale on a large scale" (63-64), revealing that small is not only beautiful, but also potentially powerful.

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