

Mapping academic discourses on gender in European farming from a feminist political ecology perspective

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1. Introduction

Academic literature on agrarian change in Europe has increasingly integrated an analysis of social dynamics, resulting in the gradual mainstreaming of gender within research and in agricultural policies. Yet farming in Europe remains a predominantly masculine domain (Ball, 2020; Dunne et al., 2021) and scholarship continues to observe how patriarchal power relations shape agricultural practices, institutions and knowledge production.

This mapping review uses feminist political ecology (FPE) as an approach to analyse the scholarly literature published on gender in European agriculture since 1980. FPE foregrounds the co-constitution of gender, power and socio-ecological relations, revealing how gendered divisions of labour, unequal access to land and resources, and institutional norms have historically marginalised women and gender-diverse people. At the same time, FPE draws attention to the ways in which research itself constructs dominant narratives about farming and can either reproduce or challenge existing inequalities. FPE not only exposes persistent inequalities but also highlights the transformative potential of feminist, agroecological and community-based social movements. This perspective offers a framework for re-evaluating existing scholarship and for identifying participatory and politically-engaged research methodologies to support socio-ecological change.

Our review contributes to the development of a collaborative feminist conceptual framework on the barriers and opportunities connected to gender equality in European farming within the SWIFT project (Supporting Women-Led Innovations in Farming and rural Territories).²

It builds on Berit Brandth's systematic review of the academic literature on gender in European family farming, which identified three dominant discourses - the family farm, masculinisation, and detraditionalisation and diversity (Brandth, 2003). Brandth traces the theoretical shift in scholarship from making farm women visible by quantifying their roles and contributions to investigating the social construction of gender identities. Brandth argues that the discourse of the heteronormative family farm remains hegemonic, creating masculine and feminine subject positions that are difficult to subvert.

In the two decades since Brandth's review, there have been two academic overviews of conceptual and theoretical approaches to agrarian change in Europe from a gender perspective. Gustavsson and Farstad (2022) revisit feminist and gender research in Norwegian farming and forestry. Clark et al. (2023) conduct a scoping review of the integration of a gender approach into the global political economy literature on smallholder farmers. Several other studies focus on the extent to which women farmers have become more economically equal to men in countries in the Global North (Ball, 2020; Dunne et al., 2021).

Despite these important contributions, much of the academic literature on gender in European farming remains structurally deterministic, emphasising barriers to women's equality while underplaying the agency of individuals, collectives, and social movements (Cush et al., 2018; Saugeres, 2002a, 2002b). FPE scholars have critiqued the narrow use of "gender" as synonymous with "women" (Nightingale and Harcourt, 2021) and instead highlight gender as a relational, intersectional, and power-laden construct (Mollett and Faria, 2013). This aligns with broader rural studies scholarship that examines how gendered identities, roles, and

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¹ <https://swiftproject.eu>

² We also used related terms such as farm*, subsistence, peasant, food system. Literature on fisheries that appeared in the search was kept and included to complement the analysis. Civil society organisations have repeatedly highlighted the important role that women play in food and nutrition security including fisheries (Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism for Relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security (CSM4CFS, 2019). They note that the global food system perpetuates gender based-discrimination (CSM4CFS, 2018). The term peasant as defined in Article 1 (2) in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) describes the different constituencies reflected in the peasant identity.

values are produced across micro- and macro-scales (Leslie et al., 2019; Reigada et al., 2021; Vercillo, 2022).

A further gap concerns the relationship between academic research and civil society. In the two decades since Brandth's study, feminist and peasant movements have significantly expanded their work on gender and intersecting forms of oppression within agri-food systems (Calvário and Desmarais, 2023; LVC, 2021; MacInnis et al., 2022). Academic literature has not been systematically reviewed to examine the influence of these theoretical and methodological developments.

For these reasons, we undertake an up-to-date mapping review that examines how gender in European agriculture is conceptualised, which discourses dominate, and where silences persist. Our analysis is guided by three questions.

- Which keywords and understandings regarding gender and related concepts have emerged over time?
- What are the main discourses on gender relations?
- What are the gaps and possibilities for future research regarding the intersecting inequalities, beyond gender, from a feminist political ecology perspective?

We focus on the ways academic authors construct gendered structures and agency, and how these constructions shape possibilities for change. As activist-researchers, we also reflect on the relationship between scholarship and civil society perspectives, asking whose voices are amplified and how engaged research can contribute to dismantling intersecting relations of power.

After presenting our analytical framework and methods, we provide a bibliometric overview of papers that were included in the mapping, as well as a summary of the main authors and countries that were the focus of their studies. A keyword analysis is used to highlight the central topics emerging and changes over time. We then outline the different understandings of gender that can be identified from the literature by grouping key themes into five dominant discourses and highlighting how these discourses are co-constituted through the interplay of structures and agency.

2. Feminist political ecology: an analytical framework

Our analytical approach is grounded in FPE, which centres power relations and the plurality of knowledges within socio-ecological systems. FPE interrogates what counts as knowledge, whose perspectives are viewed as authoritative, and how research practices themselves shape gendered and ecological realities (Gottschlich et al., 2022; Sundberg, 2017). It also provides a space to connect academic debates with situated feminist research praxis and the political strategies of rural social movements (Harcourt, 2020; LVC, 2021).

2.1. Conceptualising gendered structures and agency in feminist political ecology

The following section discusses some of the core analytical concepts that are deployed, referred to or implicit within the literature on gender and European farming from the perspective of FPE.

FPE builds on feminist scholarship that conceptualises gender as socially constructed, historically contingent, and embedded in power relations (Crenshaw, 1991; Rao, 2025; Scott, 1986). It emphasises gender's intersection with race, class, colonialism, heteronormativity, and other axes of oppression, particularly in struggles over land and natural resources (Mollett and Faria, 2013). Gender relations in agriculture are therefore understood as dynamic, non-binary and intertwined with changing socio-ecological relations and multiple forms of knowledge about the human and non-human world (Bauhardt and Harcourt, 2019).

Within rural sociology, debates on structures and agency are central. Structures - formal and informal rules, norms, and material conditions -

shape social positions and subjectivities (Giddens, 1984). Agency refers to how individuals and collectives navigate, negotiate, and transform these structures (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018). FPE and intersectional feminist theories view structures and agency as mutually constituted, highlighting the diverse forms of agency exercised by women, gender-diverse people, and other marginalised groups and the ways that these can challenge and transform injustices in agri-food systems (Clement et al., 2019; Misra, 2018; Mollett and Faria, 2013).

FPE also helps denaturalise hegemonic constructs such as the family farm, long positioned as the normative unit of European agriculture (Brandth, 2003; Davidova and Thomson, 2014). The family farm is widely understood as "an agricultural holding which is managed and operated by a household and where farm labour is largely supplied by that household" (Davidova and Thomson, 2014, p. 16). As the FAO points out, "[t]he family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, social and cultural functions" (FAO, 2013, p. 1). These definitions assume a hetero-patriarchal household, obscuring alternative socio-ecological relations and forms of kinship (Hoffmeyer et al., 2024). By questioning these assumptions, FPE opens space to imagine more equitable agricultural futures.

This mapping review uses FPE to analyse how academic literature produces gendered subjects through its focus on particular structures and forms of agency. In doing so, we identify both the persistence of inequalities and the possibilities for transformative change in European farming.

3. Method

We combined quantitative and qualitative approaches through a bibliometric overview and a feminist analysis of discourse. Methodologically, we were guided by structured approaches to systematic literature reviews (Booth et al., 2016). The participatory feminist research methodology (Harcourt et al., 2022) that informs the SWIFT project as a whole was also used to broaden and democratise our approach to the literature review, as we sought at various phases of the process to incorporate contributions and insights from the consortium partners.

3.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

We used the Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type (SPIDER) approach to structure our keyword search (Cooke et al., 2012). The search initially included a larger geographic scope and array of topics to incorporate the SWIFT project themes and countries, however, it was later limited to European countries and a focus on farming. The final search terms are provided in the supplementary materials. Our original plan was to also incorporate non-academic, 'grey' literature in the review; however, once we began searching, we agreed that this would be unfeasible due to the large volume of sources.

At the title-abstract screening stage we applied four inclusion criteria.

- empirical studies situated in Europe;
- analysis of gender relations, female, queer, LGBTQ+, farmers, social innovations, social movements, in farming, agricultural³ contexts;
- use of qualitative and/or mixed methods designs;
- published after 1980.

We excluded records that duplicated material covered in other reviews, were not published in an academic source, or raised concerns about methodological quality.

³ LEADER is the rural development program of the European Union financed through the Common Agricultural Policy (European Network for Rural Development, 2021).

3.2. Literature search

We systematically searched the SCOPUS and Google Scholar databases in July 2023 and updated the search in February 2024. For each database, we developed a search syntax based on our inclusion criteria. In addition, the first author screened reference lists of review articles and book chapters. Members of the SWIFT project consortium – farmers, civil society and academics - were asked to contribute relevant literature. To ensure methodological rigour, we followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (see Fig. 1).

3.3. Screening

After the literature search, we imported all references to the CADIMA platform to check title -abstract against the inclusion criteria and to remove duplicates (Kohl et al., 2018). We extracted the list of included studies to Excel and downloaded the PDF files to conduct a full-text analysis. The first author screened all titles and abstracts as well as full texts. Co-authors (LdSA, and BS) assisted by two other SWIFT researchers double-checked the texts. At title-abstract level, 30% of the studies were double-screened, and at full-text level, 20% were double-screened by co-authors (LdSA and BS). Inconsistencies were discussed and resolved in the group. Studies in English, German, Polish, Greek, Italian, French, Portuguese and Spanish were reviewed.

3.4. Data extraction

During the full-text screening, we did a preliminary content scan of the studies. In this phase, we noted the country where the study was conducted and whether it focused on structures or agency, or both. Atlas.ti software was used to thematically code and analyse the studies. Data extraction was mainly conducted by the first author, and 45 studies were coded by the second and third co-authors (LdSA and BS). This process served to share some of the work, to iteratively refine the categories used, and to make collective decisions about emerging themes. A summary of the process and mode of data extraction and analysis is provided in Fig. 2.

3.4.1. Bibliometric analysis

The bibliometric analysis was carried out by the first author using the Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny software package and app interface (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017). Only those studies available in SCOPUS (n = 196) were included in the bibliometric analysis. VOSViewer was used to create a keyword co-occurrence network. This is a distance-based visualization showing the connectedness of authors' keywords (Van Eck and Waltman, 2017).

3.4.2. Qualitative analysis

Using a feminist analysis of discourses (Bacchi, 2005), we identified how gendered assumptions are produced and sustained in research. Research is a process, and academics as actors are not separate from the

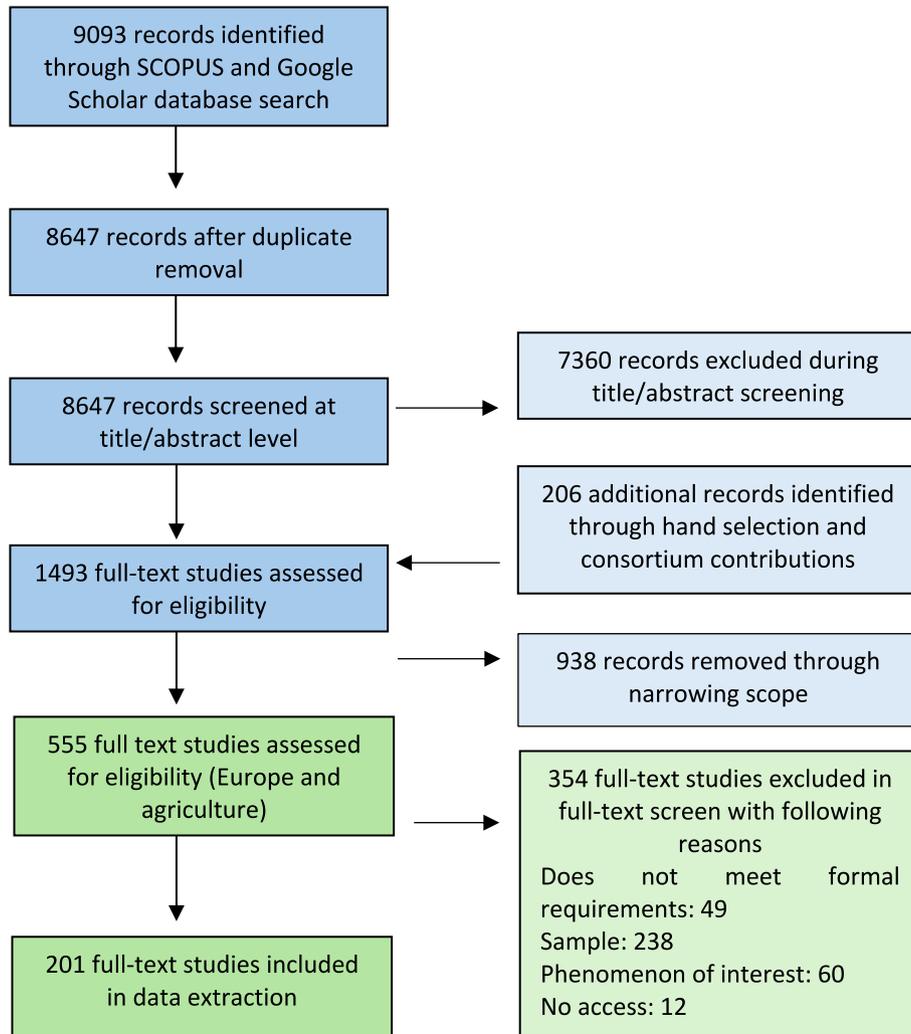


Fig. 1. Prisma flow chart.

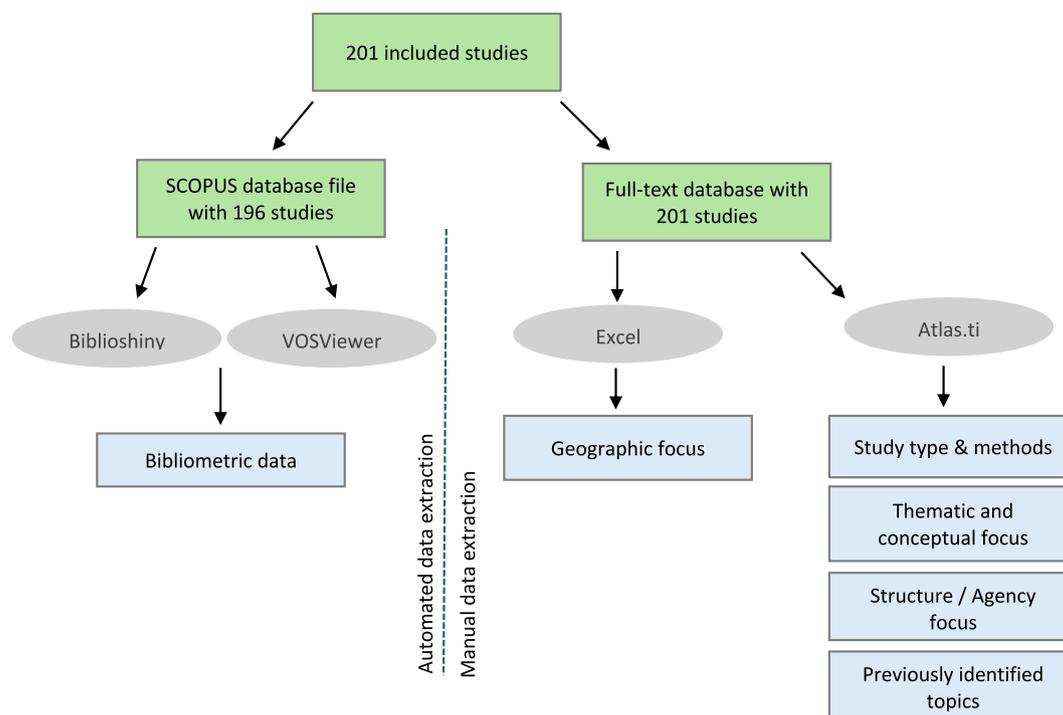


Fig. 2. Process and mode of data extraction. Green: data source, Grey: software used, Blue: information extracted. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

practices of meaning-making represented in discourses (Wetherell, 2001). By shaping the research context, formulating the justification, and choosing the research questions, academics can both reproduce and challenge dominant narratives. The bibliometric overview complements this analysis by showing where discourses originate geographically and how they circulate among researchers.

Our analytical focus was on the abstract, introduction, discussion, and conclusion of each study, where authors typically articulate their approach, focus, and contribution. We conducted qualitative content analysis in Atlas.ti using a combination of deductive and inductive codes, and each study was briefly summarised in the comment field.

We first examined how studies conceptualised gender, distinguishing between descriptive approaches that treat men and women as fixed categories, and causal approaches that interrogate gender as a socially constructed relation of differentiation and oppression (Scott, 1986, 2010). We also identified studies employing an intersectional framework (Norris et al., 2010).

The categories of structure and agency (Giddens, 1984; Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018) guided our coding of passages related to justification, research focus, theoretical framing, methods, conclusions, and recommendations. Additional concepts such as duality, intersectionality, and empowerment were coded during the synthesis stage.

To identify discourses, we clustered the main structure and agency-related codes collaboratively. These clusters were then used to revisit the coded documents, refine assignments, and identify illustrative examples. The resulting discourses are not discrete; their boundaries often overlap, and individual studies may draw on multiple or even contradictory discursive strands.

4. Results

Out of the 9093 records identified in the initial search, 201 studies from 368 different authors were included for final analysis (Fig. 1). These were published in 97 different sources (journals and books). The majority (187) of the studies were written in English, with contributions in Spanish (7), German (4) and French (3) also being included. An

overview of all included studies can be found in the supplementary materials. Throughout the results, the document ID is indicated in square brackets.

4.1. Geographies of studies and authors

The geographic distribution (Fig. 3) shows a strong concentration of studies in Spain ($n = 31$), Norway ($n = 26$), Greece ($n = 20$), the UK ($n = 19$), and Ireland ($n = 17$). Only a few studies ($n = 23$) were found across 12 countries in Central and Eastern Europe. This geographic distribution is also reflected in the affiliations of the most frequently occurring authors (see overview of most prolific authors in the supplementary materials) who are affiliated with universities in Norway, Spain, the UK and Greece. This pattern can partly be seen in the origin of funding from national institutions, such as the Norwegian Research Council or national ministries from Spain, Sweden and the UK.

The bibliometric analysis shows that most studies appear in rural sociology and rural studies journals. Citation patterns mirror this concentration: articles from these fields are the most frequently cited both within our mapping review of European literature and globally (see supplementary materials for an overview of local and global citation patterns). Local citation data also highlights the central influence of Berit Brandth's work, with her 2003 review being the most frequently referenced source. Her publications receive the highest number of global citations among the included studies, underscoring their enduring impact on rural gender scholarship.

4.2. Central keywords and co-occurrence

An overview of the central topics and how these have changed over time is provided using a keyword co-occurrence network visualization in VOS Viewer (Fig. 4) and a trend topic analysis from Biblioshiny (Fig. 5). The keyword co-occurrence shows the centrality of keywords within the included studies while the trend topic analysis shows when they emerged and their use over time. The keyword co-occurrence reveals the centrality of 'gender', 'gender relations', 'gender role' and the 'family

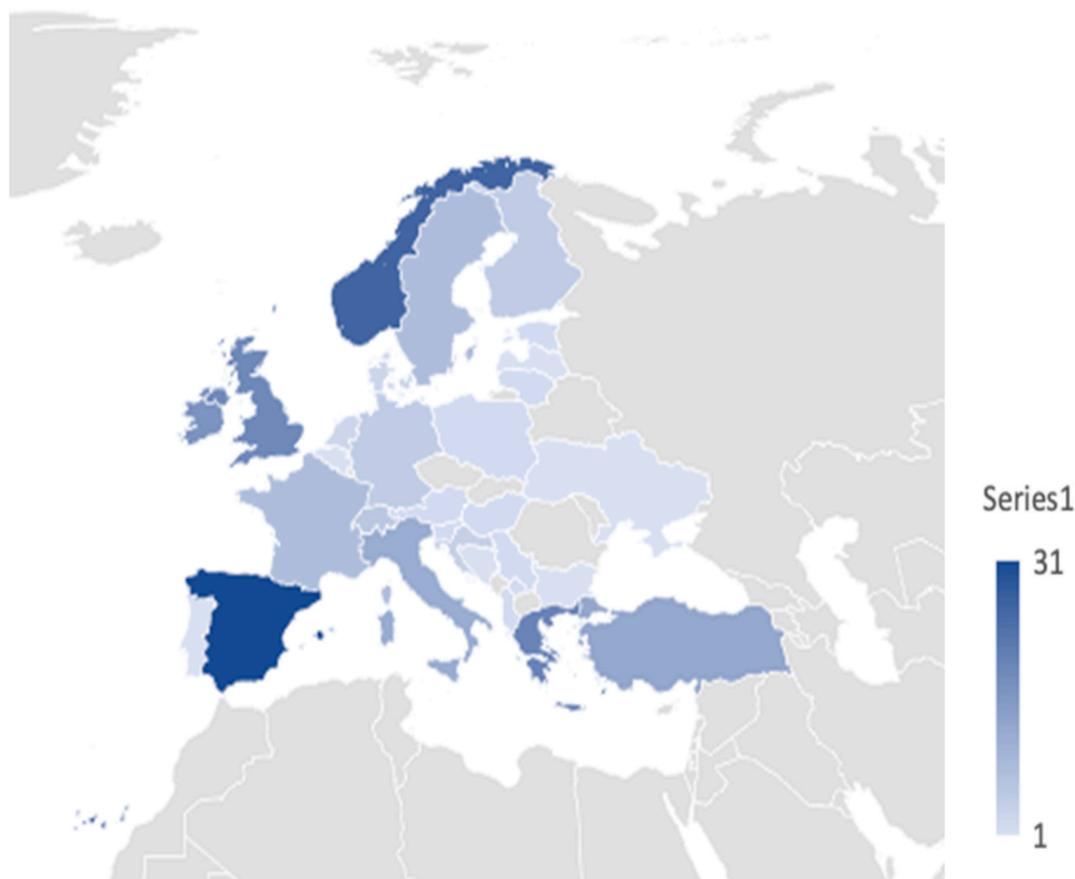


Fig. 3. Countries studied in examined body of literature (n = 201). Four studies concerned multiple countries, these were added separately to the count.

farm'. References to the family farm structure started in the early 2000's. While 'gender relations' has been used since the year 2000, 'gender', as a stand-alone term, and 'gender identity' emerged in 2013.

The network visualization shows that 'women's status' dominates the keywords, appearing 40 times at the centre of the network. Earlier studies frequently used 'women', while more recent work has shifted toward 'female'. Despite their long-standing presence, 'male' and 'masculinity' remain marginal. Terms reflecting non-binary gender expressions are absent, and intersecting social categories appear only indirectly, for example through the keyword 'young population' in five cases. Overall, the pattern indicates that gender continues to be treated largely as a synonym for women and framed in binary terms rather than as a spectrum of diverse gendered experiences.

'Gender equality' also appears at the periphery of the network, occurring only five times between 2015 and 2017 and linked to themes such as gendered identities, femininity, masculinity, the family farm, patriarchy and rural development. Notably, 'rights' appears only twice as a keyword, both referring to property rights. This contrasts with the 87 studies that discuss various human rights within the text, ranging from ownership rights to women's and equal rights, suggesting that a human-rights framing is rarely foregrounded in titles or keywords. Since 2010, 'feminism' has emerged as a keyword, with half of its occurrences appearing in the past two years. More specific terms such as 'ecofeminism' appear three times and 'postfeminist' once. 'Empowerment' entered the literature around the same time as 'feminism' but has been used more consistently over time.

The term 'innovation' appears only recently as an action for change, with two instances referring specifically to 'social innovation'. In contrast, 'entrepreneurship' has been used since 2009 and has been further differentiated through terms such as 'social entrepreneurship', 'rural entrepreneurship' and 'female/women's entrepreneurship'.

The VOSviewer analysis identifies five clusters. The blue cluster centres on the family farm and brings together concepts such as patriarchy and feminism to examine gender relations within this structure. The red cluster focuses on women's status and broader discussions of gender relations and identity in agriculture. The green cluster highlights agricultural workers, their gendered characteristics and decision-making processes. The yellow cluster links gender to rural areas, education, youth and innovation. Together, these clusters offer an initial overview of the discourses present in the literature.

4.3. Approaches to gender

Gender as a category of analysis appears in 55 instances. In these cases, it was used as a proxy for biological sex to define the sample population or as an explanatory variable to describe different experiences and roles on the farm, without seeking to explain how this difference is created. Gender as a social condition appeared in most studies (n = 129) as a way to explain how differences are created. In line with constructivist conceptualisations of gender, this literature argued that gender is not fixed but constructed through meanings and practices.

Despite the frequent engagement with constructivism, gender is still used as a synonym for women, and few studies consider men or diverse gender identities. Only 12 of the 201 included studies focus on male identities, while 47 mention masculinities (from 2005 onwards). While a small number of studies engage with queer theory (9 studies reference gender performativity and Judith Butler) only two studies considered non-binary understandings of gender [18, 36] and only one focuses specifically on the situation of non-binary and queer persons [18]. This suggests that research interest in queer theory and diverse understandings of gender remains underdeveloped in Europe.

While we identified multiple studies that consider intersecting

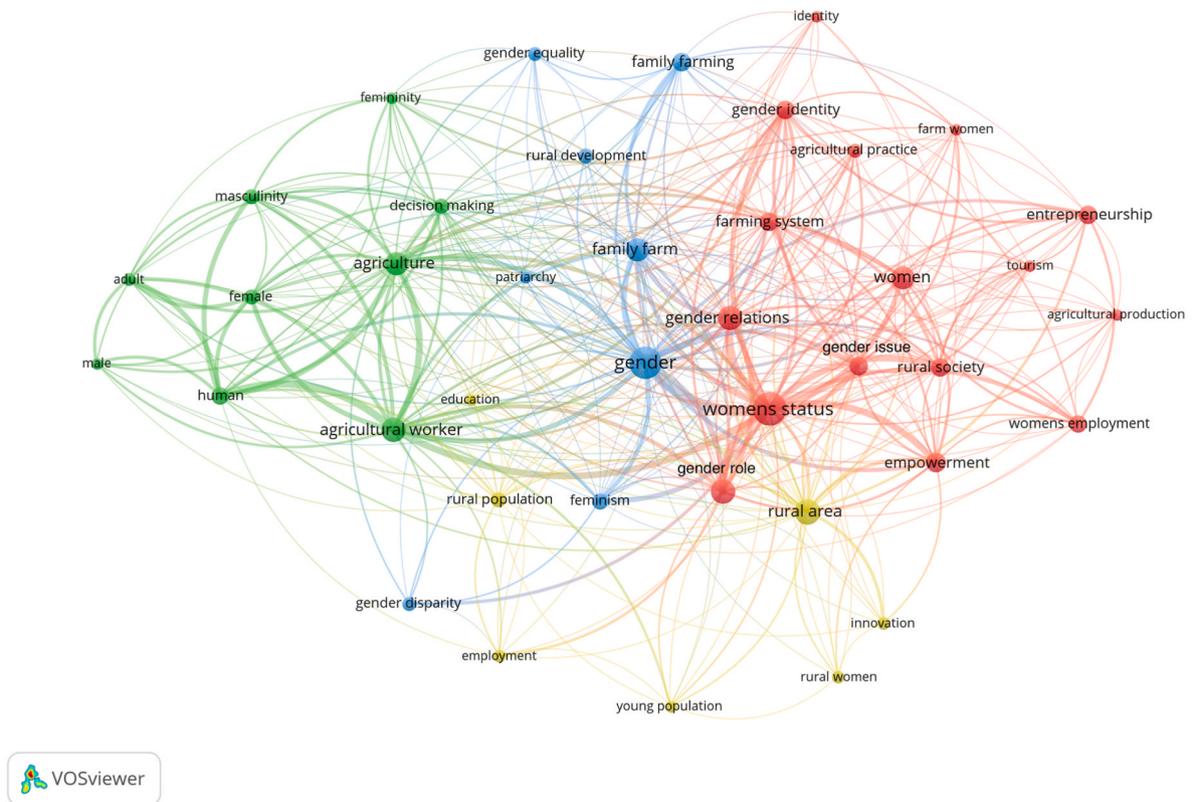


Fig. 4. Network visualization of keywords. The size of the nodes indicates frequency, and the links indicate co-occurrence. The position of the nodes indicates centrality (in terms of connections). Source: VOSViewer (Author's key words, full counting, min. Number of occurrence: 5, methods and countries removed).

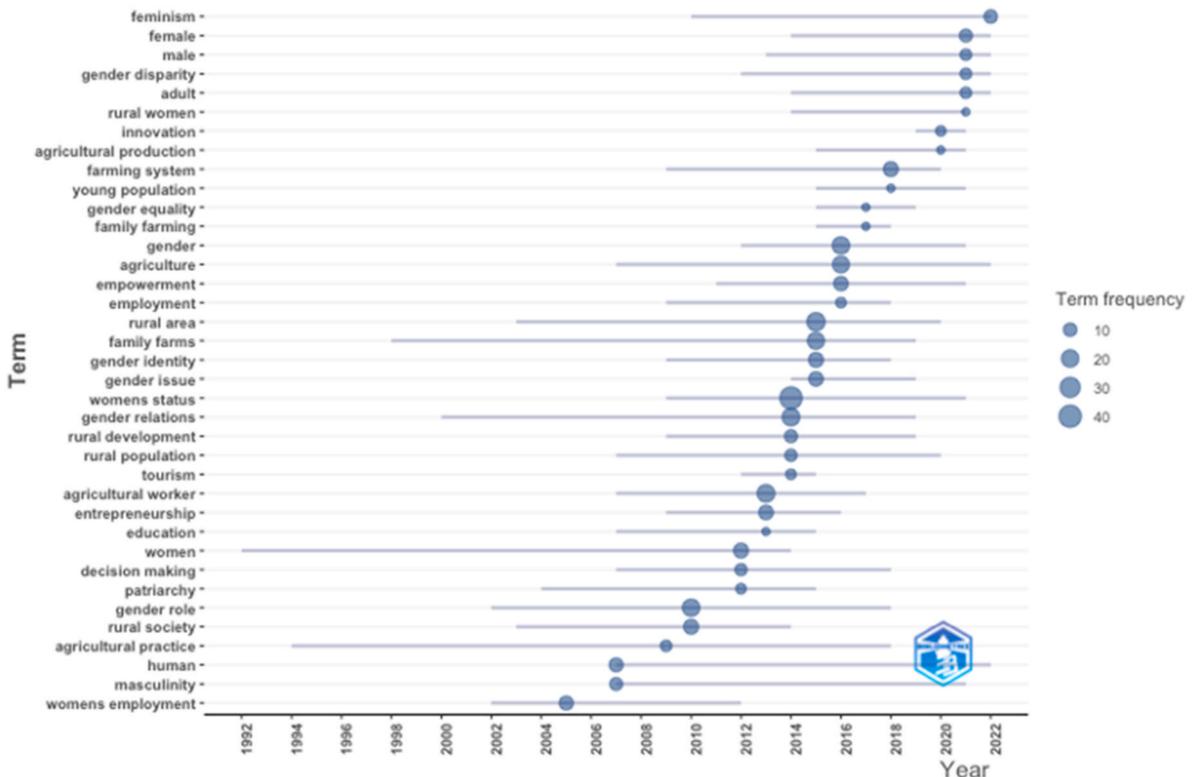


Fig. 5. Keyword trend visualization. The size of the node indicates frequency, the positioning indicates the mean year of occurrence. Source: Biblioshiny (Author's keywords, min. Number of occurrence: 5, words per year: 5, methods and countries removed).

categories of social differentiation, only 12 studies refer to the concept of intersectionality. Within this group, authors use “intersectionality” to highlight debates about positionality, discussing how farmers’ identities influence their discursive and material practices. For example, [Gomes et al. \(2022, p. 6\)](#) write: “in addition to the economic sphere, the importance of gender relations is also recognized under an intersectional approach, which takes into account the individuality of these women, as well as their agricultural and community work” [9]. In some instances, studies consider intersectionality as a tool for analysing discrimination and marginalization. For instance, [Fernández-Giménez et al. \(2022, p. 19\)](#) propose that “future research [...] include a more explicit focus on the experiences of women of different socio-economic classes, ethnicities/countries of origin, and sexual orientations, and how these factors interact to shape their realities and decisions.” [26]

Regarding studies that considered the intersections of categories of social differentiation (without necessarily engaging with intersectional theoretical perspectives), the majority used “intersectional” as a way to include categories of “difference”, the most frequent being age ($n = 19$), and class ($n = 16$). Other categories, such as ethnicity, race, sexuality, family status, religion, political orientation and geographic location were mentioned less frequently. Given the reliance of European farming on seasonal migrant labour, it is striking that while 14 studies mention the role of migrant agricultural labour, only four pay attention to the specific situation of migrant labourers in European farming [9, 12, 22, 49].

Intersectionality as a normative theory for investigating power dynamics holds less prominence among the studies. One example is offered by [Reigada et al. \(2021\)](#) who use the Spanish context to highlight the interdependence of domestic and market dynamics, arguing that both gender and class relations are central to the functioning of globalised agri-food chains [40]. Also, the study by [Zhlilima et al. \(2023\)](#) on land inheritance in Albania emphasised that gender inequality is exacerbated where poverty and patriarchy combine. Only two of the included papers used FPE as a framework [26, 72] while six studies refer to the contributions made by FPE [7, 29, 31, 36, 48, 52], with all of these studies being published between 2018 and 2023.

4.4. Academic discourses

Our mapping review identified five main discourses on gender relations in European farming: i) facing norms and expectations, ii) centrality of the family farm, iii) change through entrepreneurship, iv) change through public policy, and v) relevance of collective public action. These discourses reveal how gender relations are structured, challenged and negotiated across different European contexts, highlighting both persistent barriers and potential pathways toward gender equality in agriculture.

4.4.1. Facing norms and expectations

A dominant discourse concerns gendered norms and expectations in farming. Eighty-three studies refer to norms and expectations as key structures shaping gender relations. Frequently used terms such as ‘women’s status’ and ‘gender role’ indicate how societal rules permeate farm life. Highly cited works focus on ‘gender identity’, ‘the rural idyll’, ‘women’s attitudes’, and ‘gendered images’, illustrating how norms restrict women’s access to land, participation in farm work and training, while also documenting the varied ways women confront and reshape these expectations.

Despite gender-neutral legal frameworks, patrilineal inheritance remains deeply embedded in European farming [68, 103, 159, 179]. Thirty studies address this issue, showing that women often enter farming through marriage. Some studies highlight shifts in succession practices, with younger and highly educated women increasingly inheriting land [167]. [Cassidy \(2019\)](#) documents emerging pathways for women’s farm transmission [63]. Access to land also shapes gender roles: [Sutherland et al. \(2023\)](#) find that women raised on farms are more

likely to identify as farmers, whereas those entering through marriage tend to assume household roles; breaking the patriarchal succession cycle increases the likelihood of female inheritance [17]. [Saugeres \(2002a, 2002b\)](#) further shows how gendered socio-environmental relations are tied to ‘masculine’ norms associated with taming nature [217, 221].

Traditional norms continue to influence the division of productive labour [1, 58, 138, 173], often justified through assumptions about women’s physical strength [36, 57]. Discursive studies examine how such assumptions shape perceptions of competence and the figure of the ‘good farmer’ [96, 221]. [Shortall et al. \(2020\)](#) show how gender stereotyping in Scotland excludes women from inheritance and management, while also noting women’s agency in reproducing or challenging these norms [57].

Norms are also reproduced through education and training. Several studies show that traditional expectations limit women’s access to formal agricultural education [33, 43, 55, 68, 159, 192], and that educational institutions themselves reinforce gendered norms [135, 147]. Early socialisation contributes to disadvantages in formal settings [18]. In Switzerland, [Rossier & Wyss \(2007\)](#) demonstrate how gendered agricultural education restricts women’s eligibility for farm management due to unequal certification pathways [192]. Expanding agricultural education in non-specialist schools may broaden access for young women and non-farm youth, as [Beecher et al. \(2022\)](#) find in Ireland [28]. Training can also support women in shifting their economic roles and challenging prescribed norms [88, 90].

Studies also document how women actively challenge and reframe gendered expectations through farming. Many show how women assert their identities as farmers despite restrictive norms [14, 18, 203]. [Haugen and Brandth \(1994\)](#) found that young women disrupted patriarchal divisions of labour by pursuing vocational training and claiming their identity as farmers [168]. Women reshape norms through their agricultural practices [36, 85, 90, 187, 197] and entrepreneurial activities [23, 25, 29, 30, 81, 89, 158]. [Tourtelier et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that women’s alternative, often less capital-intensive farming techniques emerge partly from exclusion from masculinised conventional systems [197]. Using an FPE lens, [Fernández-Giménez et al. \(2022\)](#) show how female pastoralists confront and renegotiate gendered norms while maintaining traditional livelihoods [26]. Beyond single-axis analyses, [Roseman \(2002\)](#) identifies how gendered class identities expressed through agricultural practices can resist capitalist structures [131]. Research further illustrates how queer farmers challenge and redefine farming identities and the boundaries of the family farm [18].

The academic discourse on norms and expectations underscores the persistence of patriarchal oppression in European farming. Even when socio-political systems shift, traditional gender values and labour divisions remain entrenched. In Croatia, for example, [Šikić \(2007\)](#) shows that gender arrangements were similar during the socialist and capitalist periods [123]. Several studies note that women may reproduce traditional femininities to secure social positioning or influence [2, 133], or to maintain the family farm structure [75]. [Ní Laoire \(2005\)](#) highlights the continuation of heteronormative hegemonic masculinities within the nuclear farming family, arguing that economic pressures increasingly prevent young men from fulfilling these ideals [215]. [Kaberis and Koutsouris \(2013\)](#) identify a similar tension in Greece, where adherence to dominant masculinities among single male farmers can hinder their ability to find partners [212].

4.4.2. Centrality of the family farm

A substantial body of work has examined the family farm as the central unit through which gender relations in European agriculture are constituted and reproduced. The prominence of this discourse is reflected in the frequent citation of [Brandth’s \(2003\)](#) review and in the keyword analysis, where ‘family farm’ has appeared consistently since 1998 and is strongly linked to ‘gender’, ‘women’s status’ and ‘gender relations’. Across the included studies, the term appears 1360 times; 87

studies treat the family as a core structure, and 24 include it in the title.

Gender is used to differentiate types of family farming in relation to labour practices and divisions [182], pluri-activity [145], succession patterns [4], adoption of environmental measures [7], and farm size or business structure [139]. This discourse consistently highlights the persistence of patriarchal norms. Early studies identified the gendered division of productive and reproductive labour, patrilineal inheritance and the public invisibility of farm women as defining features of patriarchy within family farming [136, 141, 178]. Price and Evans (2006) argued that patriarchal norms underpin the survival of UK family farms, noting that women's empowerment - particularly through the right to divorce - could be perceived as a threat to farm continuity [191]. More recent research shows that these dynamics remain influential, shaping women's farming practices [162] and their capacity for innovation [173]. Rossier (2007) links rigid gender roles to limited farm development [150], while Cassidy (2019) demonstrates that when patrilineal succession is not possible, alternative inheritance pathways can open new opportunities for farm continuity and transformation [63].

The unity of family and farm means that labour is frequently shared between these realms. Tsiaousi and Partalidou (2021) show that bonds of kinship and mutual obligation strongly influence family farms in Greece. While women complete the majority of the housework, they are also frequently involved in farm work. Despite this, men remain the managers and public faces of the farm while women's work is viewed as secondary [45]. Özsayin and Korkmaz (2021) reveal a relationship between women's participation in farming activity and household size. With fewer household members, women are able to contribute more to farming activities [10]. Yet, as women become more involved in farm work, there is frequently no change in gendered care responsibilities. This is highlighted by Morell (2022) in a study of post-socialist transformation in Hungary. As women's participation on the farm became necessary, there was a revitalisation of "intergenerational solidarity between women" (p.374) as care tasks were outsourced to grandmothers or other children [29].

The complementary labour of family members is seen to play a crucial role in maintaining the family farm structure. According to Ragkos et al. (2018) women's participation in Greek livestock farms is especially important during crises for the resilience of extensive livestock systems [160]. A similar pattern was found in small-scale fishing enterprises in Ireland, where women's labour serves to "keep the boat afloat" (Coulthard and Britton, 2015, p. 218) [155]. Additional labour also increasingly takes place outside the farm. Shortall (2018) observes that women in Ireland frequently engage in off-farm employment to support the family farm, also reinforcing men's work identity as the farmer and agriculture as a male profession [75].

Research also shows the different ways women maintain and protect the family farm structure. Riley (2009) emphasises the multiple identities women perform on farms and their agency in enforcing, unsettling or rejecting patriarchal subordination. She notes that women often reframe narratives of domination as "teamwork and togetherness" (Riley, 2009, p. 672). The importance of family stability is similarly highlighted by Morell (2007) in Hungary [121]. Shortall (2018) shows how gender and family intersect on Irish farms, arguing that although women's roles have shifted, the family farm identity remains strong. This attachment contributes to women's resilience but can also lead to acquiescence in the face of restrictive norms [75].

Despite the persistence of the family farm structure, studies also document resistance to its constraints. Gasson (1980) and O'Hara (1997) show that mothers play a central role in shaping children's education [207], influencing succession decisions [165]. Gourdomichalis (1991) finds that women's growing reluctance to marry farmers threatens the continuation of family-based livestock production [139]. In Turkey, Eren Benlisoy (2023) describes women's decisions to take up low-waged greenhouse labour as an alternative to unpaid family work in subsistence farming [22].

Few studies explore alternative conceptualisations of the family farm

beyond the nuclear, heteropatriarchal model. Pfammatter and Jongerden (2023), in their study of queer farmers in Switzerland, challenge binary understandings of gender embedded in traditional farm structures. They argue that farming practices generate multiple gender expressions that remain invisible due to persistent heteronormative and binary assumptions [18].

4.4.3. Change through entrepreneurship

The third discourse frames entrepreneurship as a pathway for changing gender relations. It centres on pluriactivity and diversification as strategies that broaden farm activities, create employment opportunities for women and strengthen their position within farming households. Keyword patterns show that 'entrepreneurship' is closely linked to farm tourism, rural areas and gender roles. This discourse emerged in the 2000s and has grown substantially, with more than half of the studies being published in the past decade.

Within this discourse, pluriactivity and entrepreneurship are interpreted as expressions of agency [25, 46, 158] and empowerment [6, 30, 81, 83, 136]. Numerous studies argue that entrepreneurial activities can challenge [3, 38, 136], change [23, 25, 29, 30, 81, 89, 158] or undo [1, 89] gendered identities. Wallace et al. (1996) found that women running farm businesses gained confidence and status, shifting household power dynamics [136]. More recent work shows similar effects in organic production [6] and farm tourism [83]. Berglund et al. (2022) conceptualise women's rural entrepreneurship as feminist resistance, arguing that women-run businesses counter masculine, competition-oriented entrepreneurship narratives by foregrounding collective strategies for overcoming structural barriers [16].

This discourse also shows that women's entrepreneurship typically develops in service-oriented activities such as farm tourism or small-scale retail, described by Morell (2022) as "a feminine niche" (p. 385). These businesses are portrayed as spaces for creativity and autonomous action [22, 29, 56, 83, 89, 104], offering visibility and employment [169]. Möller (2012) argues that persistent barriers to women's access to land and farming activities make it necessary to create parallel arenas for female autonomy [104].

The literature cautions against uncritical acceptance of the assumption that women's entrepreneurship brings financial independence and increased decision-making power on the farm. Gasson and Winter (1992) explored how farm pluriactivity changed family farm gender relations, arguing that it is individual attitudes that affect family power relations rather than pluriactive engagement. Evans and Ilbery (1996) show that on-farm pluriactivity in the form of offering farm accommodation did little to improve women's decision-making power in the family or their financial autonomy [183]. This is confirmed by Annes and Wright (2015) showing that women's empowerment through farm tourism is constrained by patriarchal culture and ideology [83]. Other authors have argued that the parallel creation of female entrepreneurial spaces may actually perpetuate unequal gender relations where women's entrepreneurial activity is mostly close to home, discontinuous and linked to reproductive and domestic tasks, while the farming activities remain masculine [29, 38, 40, 56, 104, 118]. Möller (2012) outlines these paradoxes of female entrepreneurship where their initial strategy for independence and flexibility through entrepreneurship is bounded in practice, as women entrepreneurs navigate between their businesses, the family and the household [104]. The limited potential for farm diversification and entrepreneurship to disrupt patriarchal norms is further scrutinised in studies of farm tourism, which highlight that tourists seemingly require the performance of traditional and idealised rural life [1, 3, 92].

Studies also examine different styles of entrepreneurial activity using gender as an explanatory variable to explore impacts on employment and empowerment [111, 113, 114, 154, 175]. Yet, De Rosa et al. (2021) point out that, while there are significant differences between men and women in their entrepreneurial agency, it is no longer enough to make this binary distinction as the heterogeneity and flexibility of these

identities become more apparent [175].

Studies that take a systemic approach to female entrepreneurship have also considered how this manifests within social networks and collectives. These include multiple investigations of collectives and co-operatives in Greece [80, 107, 114, 119, 29], in Central and Eastern Europe [15, 58, 97], Italy [56, 88, 175] and Spain [47, 82]. Female entrepreneurship is pointed to as an activity that has the potential to create new social networks [53, 88], while it is also strengthened by collective actions. Koutsou et al. (2009) investigate individual and collective entrepreneurship of women in Greece, arguing that cooperatives provide opportunities, as many rural women lack the formal qualifications, self-esteem and capital needed to establish a private enterprise [114]. In this discourse, collective engagement is seen as fostering women's empowerment and agency [14, 36].

Work in this discourse also points to the importance of policy actions to support entrepreneurship. De Rosa et al. (2021) highlight how policy support for collective actions facilitates access to innovations and increases female entrepreneurship in farming [175]. This was exemplified in Greece, where rural development policies focused on promoting agricultural cooperatives and collective entrepreneurship as a means of improving the position of women in rural areas [80, 114]. Koutsou et al. (2009) point to the role that the LEADER¹ programme has played in motivating entrepreneurial activity, highlighting that female participation in private or collective enterprises is dependent on both social and political factors [114].

4.4.4. Change through public policy

The discourse on norms and expectations indicates that, in many cases, these are viewed as more important and persistent than formal laws and policies. This is highlighted by Zhllima et al. (2023) who find that in Albania “[c]ulture and tradition are as important as, if not more important than, legal frameworks surrounding land ownership and inheritance” (p.32) [21]. Despite the recognition that informal norms and expectations often prevail over formal laws and policies, formal institutions (policies, laws or formal organisations) were the third most frequently discussed structure in 77 of the reviewed studies. This discourse was reproduced through the conclusions and recommendations made in the studies, with calls for more equitable and inclusive policy-making to promote women's political participation and decision-making.

Studies which reinforce the idea that gender relations are impacted through changes in formal institutions frequently examine the gendered use and effects of different policies. In 1986, Hetland discussed how agricultural policies for farm pluriactivity changed gendered divisions of farm labour [145]. More recently, literature has focused on the gendered effects of agricultural and rural policies on generational renewal [5, 187, 188, 189, 198, 200], supporting farm pluriactivity and entrepreneurship [46, 158, 162] and women's cooperatives [43, 80]. Studies have also highlighted the gender bias in public financing frameworks in agriculture and rural areas [158, 164]. This results in women-led farms receiving less public money and also facing greater barriers when trying to gain financial support for their business initiatives. Adinolfi et al. (2020) find that there is a need for more indirect tools to stimulate female farm competitiveness and increase “relational assets” (p.72) such as producer organisations and agricultural networks [8].

Beyond agricultural and rural policies, other policy spheres have gendered impacts. For example, Castro et al. (2020) in their study of Spanish employment regimes point out that quotas for foreign employees in farming devalue female labour in fruit and vegetable packaging plants [12]. More generally, Di Masso et al. (2022) explores local food policy as a site for potentially transformative feminist engagement [34]. Formal rules may pose barriers to gendered agency, as exemplified by Ecurriol Martínez et al. (2014), who found that hygiene standards limited small-scale female entrepreneurship [95]. Complex and insufficient regulation is highlighted as a challenge for female organic farmers in Denmark [130].

The shortage of public services in rural areas influences women's positioning and labour on farms [167], constrain claims to farmer identity [14], and hinders employment [117]. Studies show that social innovation and entrepreneurship in farming are often organised around the lack of certain public services, such as childcare and training. As a response, local initiatives, frequently led by women, step in to fill the gap [42, 54, 56, 58]. For example, Gramm et al. (2020) examine the case of farm-based childcare organised by women in Italy and argue that this has empowerment potential through visibility and economic contribution, while it can also increase women's work burden and entrenched traditional gender roles [75].

There is some evidence that policy measures can catalyse changes in patriarchal structures. Cush et al. (2018) show how the institutional framework of joint farming ventures, incentivised through policy, has challenged the dominant family farm narrative, giving formalised shape to women's agency and offering an avenue to break away from patriarchal structures [74]. The young farmers' incentives in Greece have also increased the number of female farm managers [187]. Yet, as Gidarakou et al. (2008) argue, this failed to challenge the gender regime within family [188]. In total, 16 studies point to the necessity of public policy support and recognition of women, but do not engage with specific policies.

4.4.5. Relevance of collective public action

We identified a less dominant discourse on public and collective action to change unequal gender relations, with studies mentioning mutual support (n = 21), political participation and advocacy (n = 20) or women's collectives and cooperatives (n = 18).

This discourse focuses on the gendered barriers to public action and advocacy, such as in farming organisations [14, 43, 84, 110, 189, 196] and highlights women's role in community and network building [97] and in the creation of social innovations [42, 54, 58]. The work on collective action has mainly studied collective entrepreneurship, as outlined in the entrepreneurial discourse, and systems of mutual support. Few studies discuss activism or social movements [26, 36, 48, 58, 97]. Three of these studies concern the extensive livestock sector in Spain, where gendered social movements are contesting patriarchy and inequality while defending traditions and building supportive networks [26, 36, 48]. This discourse is complemented by research in the field of social innovation, which seeks to explore how gender relations are reconstructed through civil society-based processes that address structural barriers (Sarkki et al., 2021). Social innovation has been used as a concept to explore the initiation of childcare on farms [42], agrotourism networks [58] or value-added on-farm production [42].

Multiple studies point to the spontaneous, often informal but substantive support that women farmers provide to each other in different contexts [14, 15, 26, 29, 82, 97, 117]. This mutual support occurs in agricultural activities [26, 29, 36, 83, 90, 113], care and domestic tasks [15, 52, 117] and activism [97]. The occurrence of mutual support is closely related to care. Creating connections of care and support for farmers is mentioned in the context of care farming in Sweden [31] and on urban farms in Lithuania [52]. This discourse also underlines the important role that women play in local community building, forming networks and ensuring knowledge transfer. Lozano and Rodrigo (2013) highlight women's associations for agricultural production as a centre for participation and empowerment [99]. In Poland, Pasięka (2013) focuses on female agency in establishing an agri-tourism network to improve the employment and material situation of women in rural areas [97]. Fernández-Giménez et al. (2021; 2022) point out that networks led by women create opportunities to overcome capitalist structures while also defending traditional knowledge in extensive livestock management systems [26, 48].

This discourse has called attention to the institutional, structural, historical and cultural barriers that women face in engaging in farming organisations and political leadership [196]. According to Tsiaousi and Patalidou (2023) in Greece, female farmers, frustrated by

discrimination in established agricultural organisations, have created their own less formalised networks of mutual support [14]. Gava et al. (2021) point out that women are not allowed to join farmers' organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, resulting in their interests being underrepresented [43]. Brandth and Bjørkhaug (2015) investigated the effects of a voluntary quota to increase female participation on boards of agricultural cooperatives in Norway. They argue that this can challenge and promote new understandings of gender [84]. In Andalucía, Palenzuela Chamorro and Cruces Roldán (2011) point to patriarchal norms and European policy as barriers to female participation in local politics while highlighting that formal institutions, such as a national law that enforces gender parity on electoral lists, can present an opportunity for women. The authors show that their political engagement has enabled them to overcome structural obstacles, becoming "agents of dynamization of rural development" (Palenzuela Chamorro and Cruces Roldán, 2011, p. 513, own translation)[110].

Other studies have pointed out that, in some cases, organisations of female farmers have avoided confronting gendered power structures. For example, Černič Istenič in her study of rural development programmes in Slovenia in 2015 concludes that the Slovenian Farm Women's Association has remained confined to non-political topics, traditions and interests close to the domestic sphere (Černič Istenič, 2015) [189]. A 1997 study by Brandth and Haugen (1997) of the magazine of the Norwegian Women Farmers Organisation reached similar conclusions. The magazine did not address inequality or feminist claims until the 1990s, but pursued a strategy of cooperation rather than confrontation, with a focus on increasing the recognition of female work on the farm and protecting the family farm unit [174]. In contrast, Castelló and Romano (2023) show how a Spanish shepherdess movement used public dissemination of videos to build support and challenge patriarchal stereotypes [48]. The movement has succeeded in promoting and maintaining "a networked sisterhood that activates intersectional approaches in favour of alternative structures to farming and life in rural areas" (Castelló and Romano, 2023, p. 1659).

5. Discussion

While academic literature on gender in European farming has expanded, it remains shaped by a small group of rural sociology scholars and is geographically concentrated in Western Europe. Gender is still treated as a synonym for women, with limited attention to gender diversities, and research on masculinities remains peripheral. Only a small number of studies use an intersectional framing (Crenshaw, 1989), and most of these deploy a narrow set of social categories such as age or marital status, while class, ethnicity, and migratory status are rarely addressed.

Our discourse analysis builds on Brandth's 2003 systematic review and demonstrates the persistence of many of the same patterns she documented two decades ago. Traditional gender norms remain central across contexts, and patriarchal expectations continue to be identified as major barriers to equality. The family farm is consistently framed as the primary site of negotiation for gender roles. Proposed pathways for change often centre on market-oriented strategies, particularly female-led entrepreneurship. Yet several studies caution that this may create parallel feminine spaces on farms or increase women's workloads without altering underlying power relations. Policy interventions are also recommended; however, collective and public forms of action receive comparatively little attention in the academic literature, despite evidence that women and gender-diverse people are engaging in political advocacy to challenge inequalities.

These research trends have not developed in isolation. EU funding frameworks have long prioritised increasing women's employment in farming and rural areas as rural development and renewal strategies. This helps explain the strong policy emphasis on entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. Other gendered ruralities have received far less attention in both research and policy. Queer identities were only

acknowledged in the CAP strategic dialogue in 2024 (European Commission, 2024). Meanwhile, civil society initiatives have broadened understandings of gender and feminism in agricultural settings, including through the negotiation of rights-based instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) (United Nations, 2018), the recognition of diverse gender identities (ECVC, 2021), and intersectional analyses of migrant agricultural labour (Güell, 2022; Ruiz-Ramírez, 2024).

Using feminist political ecology as an analytical frame allows us to foreground the relational and intersectional processes through which gendered subjects are produced in agriculture and in research itself. FPE draws attention to how power operates across scales, how knowledge is valued or marginalised, and how gendered and ecological relations are co-constituted. From this perspective, we observe that European research has largely taken a descriptive approach, rarely engaging with normative, participatory or action-oriented methodologies that collaborate with civil society. This contrasts with research in 'developmental' contexts outside Europe, where participatory and action-research approaches are more common (Calcagni, 2025; Pontes et al., 2024; Sacht et al., 2021). Only four recent studies on gender in European farming explicitly engage with FPE, even though it is increasingly used to analyse gendered dynamics in agriculture elsewhere (Mollett and Faria, 2013). We argue that overcoming persistent inequalities in European farming requires more engaged feminist research that centres the knowledge and experiences of agrarian social movement actors and adopts a normative commitment to advancing gender justice. A systematic review of civil society literature, which we could not undertake due to time constraints, would be an important next step in filling this theoretical and methodological gap.

FPE also helps address limitations in current discursive representations by emphasising the interconnections between power, gender and the environment. It prompts questions such as: How might our understanding of gender in European farming shift if we moved beyond the traditional family farm as the primary analytical unit? How do migratory status and ethnicity reshape gendered inequalities? How are collectives reframing political approaches to socio-ecological relations? What becomes visible when we examine how patriarchy, racism and capitalism intersect in rural contexts?

FPE further enables us to question the dominance of the family farm discourse. Academic engagement with this concept, whether critical or supportive, often reinforces the assumption that the heteronormative family farm is the inevitable foundation of rural Europe. Recent work challenges this. In their introduction to a symposium on family farm diversity, Hoffmeyer et al. (2024) argue that it may be time to move beyond biological and marital relations when analysing agricultural systems. They suggest that putting the family farm ideal 'into crisis' could reveal how it functions as a barrier to gender equality. Recent studies on queer farmers show that alternative farm management and ownership structures can create more equitable and inclusive rural spaces for people of all genders (Hoffmeyer et al., 2024; Leslie, 2017; Leslie et al., 2019; Pfammatter and Jongerden, 2023; Raj, 2024).

As with the discourse on entrepreneurship, Hoffmeyer et al. (2024) identify a reformist tendency within the family farm discourse with efforts being focused on the creation of new spaces within existing, unequal structures rather than transforming them. Although entrepreneurship can offer opportunities for women, it often fails to challenge patriarchal norms (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Clark Muntean and Ozkazanc-Pan, 2016). FPE shows how patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism depend on and devalue the unpaid social and environmental care disproportionately performed by women (Federici, 2018). As a result, entrepreneurship may increase both productive and reproductive labour without altering exploitative relations. Feminist agroecological movements, by contrast, foreground relations of care, reciprocity, trust and cooperation over profit and productivity (CSM4CFS, 2019).

FPE further highlights that while individual agency matters, collective action is essential for challenging interlocking systems of

oppression. Our analysis identifies multiple spaces where collective action can advance gender equality, such as through agricultural cooperatives (Fernandez-Gimenez et al., 2021; Tsiaousi and Partalidou, 2021) and networks (Castelló and Romano, 2023). Peasant movements such as La Via Campesina (LVC) demonstrate how collective organising can repoliticise gender by shifting it from the private sphere into the realm of public policy. The peasant and popular feminist politics of LVC and other agrarian social movements focus on changing unjust structures through rights-based claims, non-violence, and recognizing social and environmental care (LVC, 2021). While scholarship has examined how these movements combine feminist and peasant struggles (Calvário and Desmarais, 2023; Masson et al., 2017), research in European contexts has been less attentive to the forms of collective action, resistance and advocacy that they promote. Instead, transformation is often located in individual empowerment within the family farm or market, leaving a gap in understanding how public and political action may reshape patriarchal norms.

Intersectional social movements also highlight that resisting one form of oppression can reinforce resistance to others, arguing that ‘without feminism, there is no agroecology’ (Seibert et al., 2019). FPE similarly places care at the centre of its theory of change and examines reproductive and environmental care relationally (Van Den Berg and Rezvani, 2022). This opens possibilities for analysing how agroecological models shape gender relations and for recognizing the knowledge and labour required to sustain them. Civil society spaces such as the Nyéléni forum have long articulated these connections between human and more-than-human worlds in agroecology and food sovereignty (Nyéléni, 2015).

6. Conclusion

Academic research on agrarian change has devoted substantial attention to gender, rendering visible one important axis of inequality in rural areas. Our mapping review shows, however, that studies of gender relations in European farming remain centred on the hetero-patriarchal family farm and have failed to fully engage with intersectional analyses of power. This narrow focus limits the possibilities for imagining alternatives to entrenched patriarchal norms. It also reinforces individual and household-level dynamics, overlooking the role of collective and public action in transforming gender relations. This academic work is occurring against a backdrop of political backlash that is re-entrenching oppressive gender norms and weakening human rights-based approaches to equality.

Feminist political ecology identifies new avenues for addressing persistent inequalities in European agriculture. By foregrounding intersectional power relations, the centrality of care work and the importance of collective action, FPE shifts the analysis from gender as a fixed category to gender as a dynamic process embedded in socio-ecological relationships. It invites a reevaluation of agricultural work that recognises both productive and reproductive labour and calls for understandings of farming that extend beyond economic productivity to include care for both humans and more-than-humans. In doing so, FPE highlights the transformative potential of commoning, agroecology and diverse economies as alternatives to capitalist and industrialised agri-food systems.

Declaration of the use of generative AI

During the preparation of this work the authors used Grammarly in order to improve readability of the text. After using Grammarly, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Charlotte Voigt: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Larissa da Silva Araujo:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Barbara Stadlmayr:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Joanna Bourke Martignoni:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft. **Stefanie Lemke:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interests

Nothing to declare.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2026.104042>.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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