

## ***Gender and Organic Agriculture: A Local and Partisan Position***

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*One can approach the study of gender and organic farming in a variety of ways. One is to use gender as a variable and to compare and contrast organic and conventional farming with respect to gender and such other variables as the division of labor, decision making, participation, land or farm ownership, capitalization, ideology and so on. Another is to use women organic farmers' experiences as sites of engagement, a place from which to start making visible the gendered and complex social relationships that organize both the production and distribution of food but also to explore the culturally inscribed embodied selves of post/high modernity whose "consumer preferences" and concerns with health, risk and body regulation and modification have provided much of the market for organic produce. Whereas the modern/post-modern subject has been the subject of a great deal of sophisticated sociological theorizing on consumption and identity, it has been little applied to organic food or farming. Such a strategy implies neither a uniform nor essentialized notion of women organic farmers but conceptualizes gender as offering unique opportunities for critical examination of workings of power rather than an occasion for representation. This, therefore, is to depart from the more conventional use of gender as a variable or as a characteristic of individuals in much sociological research to one drawn more directly from feminist theorizing of gender. The data for this paper come from my own experience as a farmer and from interviews with women organic farmers in Ireland and in British Columbia. By working from the different experiences of particular women farmers in two separate localities, my paper will seek to explore the potential of organic farming to organize agriculture and food production in new ways that are both ecologically and socially just, and hopefully make a contribution to the current debates over conventionalization and capitalization in organic farming.*

### **Should I be writing this paper or getting more involved in our local struggle?**

As I write this paper the BC Provincial government is drawing up new regulations around the inspection, slaughter and sale of meat. Local small farmers tell me these will put most small scale livestock farmers who rely on farm gate sales out of business. The reason, the Chief Veterinary Officer explained at a recent meeting, is to have one set of regulations and standards for all BC (eventually, some farmers suspect, to harmonize these standards nationally). The other reason given was the BSE crisis - to protect Canada's billion dollar meat export industry. Local farmers' objections were dismissed as being parochial about protecting "lifestyle" and as being far less important than the national interest. Let me state my bias. I used to be a full time farmer in Ireland before I immigrated to Canada in 1986 and as well as being a professor of sociology at University of Victoria, I have a 10 acre farm and keep sheep and meat chickens sometimes and sell my organically fed meat at farm gate

The data for this paper comes from my own experiences, my participation as a farmer at local farm meetings and in-depth interviews with over 30 women organic farmers on Southern Vancouver Island and the South West of Ireland as part of a SSHRC funded research project. So in this paper, the personal, political and academic are deeply fused.

What has this got to do with gender and organic farming. One way of answering this is to say that in many ways, the value of small scale farming and farmers and the importance of the local and the uniquely particular are being marginalized, erased and devalued in ways feminists have identified as historically typical of women, women's work and women's lives, even when there was apparent ideological support for their virtue and merit. Secondly, the research literature identifies interesting associations and connections between women and organic food and farming and some of the broader social, social justice and ecological goals of the organic movement (Peter et al., 2000; Abbott Cone and Myhre, 2000; Meares, 1997; Feldman and Welsh, 1995; Chiappe & Flora, 1998; DeLind and Ferguson, 1999; Hall and Mogorodoy, 2002)

### **Gender or Engender: Variable or Process, Noun or Verb**

One can approach the study of gender and organic farming in a variety of ways. One is to use gender as a variable and to compare and contrast organic and conventional farming with respect to gender and such other variable as the division of labour, decision making, participation, land or farm ownership, capitalization, ideology and so on<sup>1</sup>. Another is to make women organic farmers' experiences as sites of engagement, a place from which to start making visible the gendered and complex social relationships that organize both the production and distribution of food. In this latter perspective one cannot conceptualize gender separately from race and class with which it intersects in different ways in different women's lives.

I had intended to start this paper with a critique of the "gender as variable" approach. Often sociological research that treats gender as a variable produces results that, in my opinion are less

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<sup>1</sup> One gets some very important understandings of gender and agriculture from this approach. In the US and Canada American context, on the one hand we learn that the modernization and capitalization of agriculture removed women from primary farm production and decision making. On the other hand we learn that even within that changed context, however, we learn, women's contribution to the productive work on the farm has been generally underestimated by gender biased research and accounting approaches.

Sachs (1996) and others (for review essays see Rickson, 1997 and Tinker, 2001) and have been more political and specific about the processes transforming rural women's involvement in farming in the South citing processes such as global restructuring, including reorganization of labor and labor migration, privatization, commercialization, increased dominance of financial capital, patriarchal and colonial land ownership and control practices etc and more recently HIV/AIDs... The detrimental policy consequences of imposing assumptions based on US based assumptions that farmers are male have been well documented. One can only hope that the sustainable development movement in agriculture and the organic movement in particular doesn't make the same mistakes.

than theoretically or politically interesting. Contemporary feminist analysis is now far more likely to treat gender as power inscribed and power inscribing processes, and sexed and racialized bodies as signifiers for and sites of wider social processes . It was with pleasure I re-read Hall and Mogyorody's (2002) paper using gender and organic farming as variables and saw it concludes with a caution about attending to the "importance of political struggles over the meaning of organic farming and food (2002, 14) in our research efforts."<sup>2</sup>

When used as a variable, gender is often operationalized by the category women, a move which has been the subject of much current criticism by feminist scholars (Marshall, 2000). It is now often argued that theorizing gender is more conceptually sophisticated and politically correct than talking about women. Gender, Marshall reminds us has become one of the lenses through which we seek to understand ourselves and our everyday lives and public issues. Rather than being a variable or a given, gender is understood as being "continually restructured in global processes of economic and political change." (Marshall, 2000). Conceptualizing gender as a power inscribed and power inscribing process allows us to think of agricultural systems - whether conventional or alternative - as being gendered (and racialized and shaped by economic power relations).

Thus feminist would argue that gender relationships are foundational to agricultural practices, farming systems and agricultural trade regimes. Eco feminists would remind us that human relationships with the physical environment are gendered. Sarah Rickson in her 1997 review of *Women in Agriculture* published in *Current Sociology* cautions us that attending to gender is central to any attempts to develop ecologically sustainable agriculture.

...understanding women in agriculture is basic to understanding global changes in agricultural production and practices, visions of future possibilities of ecological sustainability, and to developing socially just and viable policies for the next century.(Rickson, 1997, 92).

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<sup>2</sup> Hall and Mogyorody ask - if modernization transformed agricultural gender relations, how will the emergence of sustainable alternative agriculture and organic agriculture in particular affect gender relations in farming. Or more concretely, if the development of what we now call conventional agriculture precipitated the removal of women from primary farm productive and decision making, will organic farming lead to more involvement by women in primary farm production and decision making?

## **The invisibility of gender in talk about organic farming and other things I don't know**

Leaving theoretical debates on conceptualizing gender and the category women aside, I am a little surprised at the neglect of gender and gender issues in both the literature on and public discourse on organic farming. I can't say I have exhausted the search for data but it seems easier to find data on women in farming than on women in organic farming, though gender is still inadequately attended in the literature on agriculture (Sachs, 1996; Rickson, 1997, Tinker, 2001). This is a little disappointing as we have now had the benefit of about 30 years of research on development and sustainable development and the environment, and several major world conferences that have emphasized the importance of attending to gender in issues pertaining to national and international policy to do with the major social and ecological issues of our day.

*Why has gender been so neglected in organic farming? I don't know.*

So let me start with what I do know a little about - just a little - which is women in farming in BC. BC is interesting generally because it leads Canada in the number of women who operate farms, and at 36 per cent in 2001, it was the highest in the country where the national average (in 2001) was 26.3%<sup>3</sup>. Whereas between 1996 and 2001 the number of farms in BC dropped from 32,950 in 1996 to 30,320 in 2001, this was smaller drop than most provinces, however, the proportion of female farm operators in BC remained relatively unchanged between 1996 and 2001.

Could it be that BC is bucking the national trend and keeping its farmers partly because of women. And could be that the BC farm tax assessment policy that encourages small scale agriculture is a policy that particularly benefits and thus supports and encourages women farmers, organic and non-organic?

### **But are these small scale farmers and women farmers 'real farmers'?**

BC has the highest proportion of farmers working fewer than 20 hours per week on the farm – at 38.4%. BC has almost twice the national average of farmers who have under \$25,000 in farm receipts. And 65% of farmers have farm receipts under \$25,000.

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<sup>3</sup> The following BC statistics are from Stats Canada 2001 Census data as reported in the Times Colonist, Victoria, BC (Nov 21, 2002) page C1.

Among organic farmers, 69% of those licensed with COABC had gross incomes under \$20,000<sup>4</sup> and the majority sell their product directly to consumers<sup>5</sup>. Less than 25% were involved in interprovincial or international trade in 2000.<sup>6</sup>

What seems clear is that among organic and non-organic farmers, BC is a province of small scale farming and that women are a significant proportion of these small scale farmers. This also suggests to me is that policy makers and researchers ought to follow Hall and Mogyorody's advice about the meaning of food and farming and also that they not adopt the sexist assumption (possibly drawn from notions of male industrial labor) that only full time farming provides a full or majority of family income counts as real farming.<sup>7</sup> Apart from the implicit sexism (and other isms), such a move will seriously lessen farmers' political voice. Tony Winson (19xx) connects the declining public policy support for agriculture in Canada to the decline in farmers' numbers and their political voices. Numbers count politically. Would it matter if the many small scale farmers in BC could claim clear political voices as farmers and farmer organizations - organic and non-organic were unambiguous in representing them as such? Would not the political voice of farmers' grow - although the issues they raise may change.

According to the *Agribusiness Examiner*, May 23, 2003, Issue # 250, the US may be witnessing what has hitherto been associated with the (so called) Third World, -- the feminization of small scale farming, albeit for different reasons. At a time in the US when the number of farms and male farmers is dramatically declining, farms operated by women are one of the few growth trends in agriculture. Women are the fastest growing group of small farm buyers. The number of US women in agriculture, about half of whom earn the bulk of their income from their farms rose steadily to 165,000 in 1997 and that figure is expected to increase dramatically in the 2002 US agricultural census when it became possible to identify more than one farm operator per farm. . The number of full time male farmers fell in the same period from nearly a million to 886,000. Although explanations for women's increased proportional representation in small scale farming centre women farmers' commitment to environment, animal welfare, food and community, the reconfiguration of the gendered nature of US or Canadian agriculture must be put in the context of the global restructuring of agriculture and food production.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>(BC Organic Grower, Vol 6, no.4., 2003, p.2

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Data from my file on BC facts and figures...

<sup>7</sup> These assumptions about small scale and part-time farmers being hobby farmers were central to the policy papers in a symposium on taxation and farm classification hosted by the BC Provincial government I attended a few years ago. See also the Editorial of *EcoFarm and Garden* Winter 2004 by Janet Wallace who raises related issues.

<sup>8</sup> Although the reasons are different, according to a recent issue of *Leisa Magazine*, small scale agriculture is increasingly feminized in the 'developing' or post colonial countries of

the South. *LEISA Magazine*, Dec 2002 [http://www.ileia.org/2/18-4/64\\_PDF](http://www.ileia.org/2/18-4/64_PDF) Retrieved Jan. 13, 2004 (whole issue).

The lack of attention to gender and to the ways in which current agricultural and trade regimes (conventional and alternative) are gendered, may function to undermine the goals of the organic movement. Here again let me quote from the conclusions of Hall and Mogorodoy's paper:

The lack of adequate attention to gender issues within the movement is in itself some reason for concern.... the gender potential of organic farming may not be realized unless there is a more concerted effort by committed alternative 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. (2002, 12-13)

### **Engendered and feminized farming: hybrid farmers and the local as important political space**

Rather than emphasizing the global restructuring of gender relationships in agriculture, in this paper I want to suggest the potential of attending to gender and gendered social relationships as holding potential to shape the development of organic farming. The recent work of Ritzer reminds us that such macro processes as globalization and rationalization also produce counter movements and open new hybridized political spaces at the intersections of the global and the local, processes Ritzer calls "glocalization". Ritzer sees the possibilities of returning to the traditional or preserving the intact local as politically and economically doomed. So theorizing the possibilities of re-engendering organic farming does not necessarily imply some romanticized version of the pioneer woman or traditional farmer but, as Ritzer might put it, a kind of hybridized new political and ecological subject – a non or less masculinist one...

I don't have data on women and organic farming in BC. I do not know what per cent of organic farmers are women, what the average size of farm is farmed by women organic farmers, what types of farming women are involved in, their gross and net incomes, what percentage of what they produce is sold locally, regionally, nationally or exported and so on. I am told that this kind of data is not available by gender in organic statistics.<sup>9</sup> I have read very little formal material that suggests that gender is considered a central concern to organic farmer or other NGOs/CSOs,<sup>10</sup> organic certifying bodies or other associations or government policy on the development of the organic industry in Canada. There were a minimal number of submissions to the session on gender at the IFOAM meetings in Victoria last year (2002). If feminist research on women and development in other regions of the world is any guide then the lack of attention to

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<sup>9</sup> It may be available, I can't say I have tried that hard to find it yet.

<sup>10</sup> Informally, gender is considered very important to the leadership of one of the local organic farmers groups with which I am familiar and a conscious effort has been made to recognize the special constraints faced by women organic farmers and to build networks and supports among women farmers. N. Lamkin also communicated his belief that gender was a very important issue in a personal conversation at the 2002 IFOAM meetings and I am aware of efforts to create a gender or women organic farmer network through IFOAM. There is also a small body of very good academic research on the issue.

gender can have seriously detrimental consequences for social and economic policies aimed at either social justice or environmental sustainability - both goals being importantly related to the goals of the organic agriculture movement.

What do I know. In the small locality where I live most of the very small scale farmers are women, many of these grow vegetables for the local market and several do free range eggs, roasting chicken and lamb as well, they sell at the farmers market, are generally organic in philosophy and methods but many are not certified. Many produce a lot of their own food for their families. These women farmers do not appear as part of the statistics on organic farming but are included (if they enter statistics at all) in the Provincial Statistics on BC Agriculture. Subsistence farming seem to hold little interest for agricultural policy makers - organic or non organic.

I am coming to suspect that small scale farmers, whether certified organic or not and those whose farming is oriented towards local markets may have far more interests in common with each other than there are common interests among that widely diverse category called organic farmers. Indeed, if as I suggest above, locally oriented small farmers - whether organic or non-organic - have more in common than organic farmers in general do, then could it be that the homogenization of the term organic food and organic farming has more to do with the priorities of marketing and distribution interests of those who sell into distant markets and whose ability to claim a premium price and capture a particular market segment lie in sharp product differentiation between organic from non-organic producers? Would this mean that some of the limited time and energy and resources leaders of the organic movement have might be usefully redirected from developing national and international standards and associated regulatory process into developing programs and encouraging governments (local, Provincial and National) to actively support the development of locally oriented, small scale organic farming.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the conscious intentions or motivation of the many hard working people who have done so much to develop the organic movement in Canada and elsewhere, standardization, as Ivan Illich's work on the standardization of language reminds us, is a key process in the centralization of power.

Product differentiation and emphasis on the difference between organic and non-organic produce is a necessity for distributors and marketers in global markets. But radically distinguishing between organic and non organic farmers in a context where many of both kinds of farmers are relatively small scale may not necessarily make for good politics. Many of the women farmers I interviewed felt a strong sense of affiliation with small farmers in general not just organic farmers, and the motivation of those who were certified often had much to do with expressing political solidarity for the organic movement, and not just the ability to claim a premium price for produce.

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<sup>11</sup> If BC is anything to go by, there is a lot happening at the grass roots. What I am advocating here is more high level policy support.

Thus I want to join Rickson's and Hall and Mogyorody's lines of analysis and reframe them into some reflections not on the impact of organic farming on gender relations in agriculture but about the importance of attending to gender in efforts to develop sustainable alternative organic agriculture. Indeed, I want to argue that whatever about developing certification standards that harmonize organic standards nationally and internationally, right now, prime priority should be consciously directed to creating the local conditions that encourage, support and attract women organic farmers and small scale locally oriented producers and other strategies for ensuring farmers gain a stronger political voice.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, I suggest the active development of locally adapted policies and practices that strongly encourage and enable women in particular (including low income women) to become organic farmers will do much to prevent the conventionalization of organic farming.<sup>13</sup> The social organization of agriculture is not gender neutral in Canada and organic farming policies that assume that it will function to reproduce gender biases in agriculture.

Maybe I am losing my perspective because of what local farmers and several branches of that traditional small farmers' organization, The Farmers' Institute, tell me about how the introduction of homogeneous Provincial standards will be undermining small scale locally oriented livestock farming. Maybe I am too influenced by the fact that my neighbor Ellen will no longer be able to kill and process her own organically raised meat chickens and sell them at farm gate. The Provincial Ministry of Agriculture tells me there are greater goods involved here – public health and safety, the billion dollar beef export industry, the livelihood of workers in the meat industry. Our local concerns appear parochial and petty compared to these grand national and international projects. But there is a long tradition in Western thought where women and their concerns have been dismissed as too domestic, parochial, partial and particular and non-rational to form the basis of universal ethical programs or National projects (they were deemed incapable of full citizenship). Now the ministry of Agriculture in BC is deeming small scale farmers where I live to be inadequate to the responsibilities of citizenship in the same ways women were so long excluded, turning them into a kind of dis-honorary women. Small scale farmers, I argue, have been politically feminized<sup>14</sup> - like women's voices they carry no political authority.

May I go out on a limb and say that there may be a lesson from feminist analysis here that would caution that the organic agriculture movement could become the kind of destructive universalizing masculinist project to "save the planet" in ways similar to what happened to the proponents of conventional agriculture's well intentioned project to "feed the world".

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<sup>12</sup> For a 'cautionary tale' from Ireland see McMahon, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> This is being done informally around Victoria by an organization called LLAFF

<sup>14</sup> See McMahon, Canadian Women Studies 2002.

## **Beyond the Master's Eyes**

In terms of leadership, when you look at things through what feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde calls the master's eyes – or rather from the perspective and interests of ruling and managing and what is problematically called national or public or other universalizing interests- you get a different take on things than if you look at them by centering the local. (That is the 2<sup>nd</sup> way to approach gender - by starting with women farmers' (and woman-like farmers') experiences. Feminist ecological economists Perkins (1999) argues that locally based food production and distribution systems are important because they reduce fossil fuel use in food trade and transportation, rely on seasonally adapted and biologically diverse farming rather than monoculture, foster the local economy and provide local employment, build community and promote organic agriculture by keeping the side effects of food production close to home thus making the externalization of social and environmental costs far more difficult. Although organic farming may deliver these social and environmental goods, it increasingly appears that if the example of New Zealand and California is to be widely reproduced, it won't. If you ground your understanding of organic farming in the experiences of the women farmers such as those I interviewed, (or the feminized male and female small scale farmer where I live in BC) then one can see that one strategy is to make organic farming a part of - one condition of developing locally based food production and distribution systems, with national and international (cross bio regional) trade in organic commodities where there are significant social, social justice, and ecological justifications, not just economic ones.

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