
Involvement of women farmers in the agro-ecological transition and transformation of their work: Chronicle of the Women group 44

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Abstract: Women professional groups appear as a resource for women to foster change in power relations on their farm. In this manuscript, we explore to what extent participation in a non-mixed professional group (Groupe Femmes 44) contributed to transformations of women farmers' work. Particularly, we question the role of women farmers in the transition of their farming system toward agroecological principles and the conditions of their empowerment within their farm which allows these transitions. Our results show that Groupe Femme 44 represents a socio-professional environment allowing women farmers to discuss, to put words and find answers on technical, communicational, organization as well as social issues. It allowed some participants to discover the existence, the relevance, and the more natural dimension of self-sufficient and autonomous systems. Therefore, it stood as a key resource to foster professional transition toward these systems. For the women who were already involved in such systems, Group Femme 44 contributes to the transition toward more equitable system by questioning work organization and gender inequality.

Key words: women farmer, agro-ecological transition, transformation of work, women farmer group, extension

Introduction

If agriculture has long been dominated by men (Barthez, 2005; Delphy, 1983), several authors agree today to evoke a feminization of this sector (Annes and Wright, 2017; Comer, 2017; Le Brun *et al.*, 2020). Results of the latest agricultural censuses in France suggest an increasing representation of women within the farmer population (In 2012, around 30% of farm operator or co-operator are women). This gain in visibility contrasts sharply with years of invisibility that characterized the experience of women in agriculture, particularly during the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, the modernization of agriculture and the integration of agricultural activity into long marketing circuits have marked the exclusion of women from production activity (Lagrave, 1988), relegating them to less visible activities considered secondary (taking on administrative tasks for example). Today, women are more visible, and they are also actors of the evolutions which affect the agricultural worlds. We are now advocating a multifunctional and sustainable agriculture, the benefits of which go beyond the productive sphere to form part of a more global societal and environmental framework. Several authors have shown that women are more involved in this form of agriculture, which provides them with a suitable framework for reclaiming the frontlines of the agricultural scene (Annes and Wright, 2016; Giraud, 2007) and thus gain visibility for their work. They are notably more involved in alternative and innovative approaches and bring a new look to the farm through new practices (Bessière *et al.*, 2014; Giraud and Rémy, 2013): short circuits, organic farming, local markets, agricultural diversification (Giraud and Rémy, 2013), leisure activities or agritourism (Brandth and Haugen, 2010; Garcia-Ramon *et al.*, 1995; Giraud, 2011) and they contribute to redefining the agricultural profession (CASDAR-CARMA, 2015). Women farmers therefore appear to be part of the transition from productivist agriculture to so-called "post-productivist" agriculture. However, if the literature combining gender and agriculture shows the significant

involvement of women in the implementation of innovative activities, what about in more "classic" farms which have not necessarily committed to diversification activities? In this paper we want to focus on more conventional farms (farms which have not necessarily engaged in post-productivist transition) and assess the role of women farmer in bringing technical and social changes. **Therefore, the aim of our communication is to question (i) the role of women farmers in the transition of their farming system toward agroecological principles: (ii) the conditions of their empowerment within their farm which allows these transitions, and (iii) to what extent participation in a non-mixed professional group contributed to transformations of their work and their farm.**

Our communication is based on a specific case study, that of *Groupe Femme 44* (a professional group of women farmers) created within the CIVAM¹Défis 44 network in 2013. The creation of this non-mixed group follows a direct request from women farmers to have space for exchange and information allowing them to legitimate their role, as woman, on their farms, but also allowing them to tackle technical questions related to the transition to self-sufficient and autonomous systems seen as agroecological systems. Indeed, these women farmers wanted to be part of this transition, in order to strengthen the sustainability of their operations, while benefiting from a secure space where they could discuss freely. These women farmers are between 30 and 55 years old, and are mainly settled in heterosexual couples, in dairy cattle, conventional or organic, and on already grassland farms or in conventional systems. In order to understand the role of these women in the implementation of an agroecological transition on their farm, we analyzed the various documents produced during the animation of the *Groupe Femmes 44* (Training report, animation tools, action plans) from its creation in 2013 until 2019. This analysis is carried out according to the theory of the community of practice (Wenger, 2010): through content analysis of minute reports of training sessions and meetings of *Groupe Femme 44*, we analyze the constructions and the evolutions⁽ⁱ⁾ of the mutual commitment of women of the group (around objects, themes that make sense), ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾of a shared repertoire (the tools that the women of the group appropriate to work and exchange together), ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ of the joint venture, that is, the objects around which the actions of the women in the group converge. We completed this analysis by carrying out individual semi-structured interviews with 5 women farmers from the group. These interviews were conducted by the facilitator of the woman group in 2 sequences which corresponds to 2 to 4 hours of interview per woman interviewed. The analyzes aimed to identify the professional developments and emancipations possibly at work among these women farmers: these dimensions were interrogated and discussed via the activity development theory and gender analysis, both detailed in the literature below.

Literature review

Historical perspective on gender dynamics in agriculture

For the past decades, women experiences in agriculture have significantly evolved. From positions of invisibility, they are now considered as key actors of the agricultural sector, especially due to their involvement in practices strongly departing from productivist agriculture. In fact, women are more involved in innovative and alternative practices, bringing new insights to what it means to farm. They are more likely to be involved in value-added agriculture, direct sales, organic agriculture, agritourism or social farming (Annes et Wright, 2017; Bessière *et al.*, 2014; CASDAR-CARMA, 2015; Giraud, 2011; Giraud et Rémy, 2013). These types of agricultural activities, requiring new sets of skills for farmers (such as processing food, selling and marketing products, welcoming guests on the farm, etc.), give value to other type of knowledge. They allowed women farmers to get involved, to become agricultural

¹ CIVAM : Centre d'Initiatives pour Valoriser l'Agriculture et le Milieu Rural

entrepreneur, and be more visible to public gaze (Annes and Wright 2017; Giraud 2004). Other research focusing on the intersection and agriculture (Salmona, 2003 ; 2010 ; Guetat-Bernard and Pionetti, 2016) suggested that, during the modernization of agriculture period, women's assignment to the domestic sphere or activities perceived as secondary (small animals, herbs, garden) as well as their lack of participation in technical/scientific trainings, contributed to the development of a critical stance toward productivist agriculture (Salmona, 2010). In other words, less involved in this modernization momentum, women could have been able to better maintain intuitive and sensitive knowledge, stemming from their concrete experiences of nature and their analysis acquired from this same experience (Guétat-Bernard and Pionetti, 2016). This set of knowledge are more inclined to be used in the context of agroecological agriculture.

The persistence of gender inequality at the farm level

However, it is important to notice that this new legitimacy did not necessarily translate into more equal power relations on farms or women's ability to resist traditional gender roles. For instance, in her ethnographic study of a farming community in South West France, Saugeres (2002) showed the persistence of an ideology describing women as "incomplete farmer." In opposition to men, they remained perceived as lacking an innate knowledge of agriculture or physical strength, stopping them to become skilled and complete farmers. More recently, the work of Annes and Wright (2015; 2017; 2019) also point to the fact that if value-added agriculture gives a venue for farm women to be more visible and express agency, it also perpetuates traditional gender roles and women's assignment to non-productive activities still perceived as secondary. For that matter, when women farmer work with their husband and/or son(s), traditional division of labor is always prevalent: to men, outside and mechanical activities, to women, activities more likely to be performed inside. This division is not problematic in itself, but it can become when it contributes to the reinforcement of an essentialist logic assigning women to specific and unchangeable tasks. This traditional division of labor particularly exists on dairy farms in which work unit is often organized around a couple. Giraud and Dufour's study (2012) show the persistence of a very strong division of labor. Men take care of the livestock, work in the fields and take strategic decision, women are in charge of milking, caring for calves, and administrative work. In addition, they are responsible for domestic work. Most women interviewed in their study express difficulties to find legitimacy on the farm.

The role of women professional groups to bring changes on the farm

Women professional groups can appear as a resource for women to foster change in power relations on their farm. Institutionalized in the 1960s to create spaces of sociability and professional claims, non-mixed professional groups experienced new interest/enthusiasm in the 2000s. The work of Clémentine Comer (reference) explores these spaces, located at the frontier between a place to acquire professional skills and a place of dialogue (Comer, 2017). Encouraged by a societal context more sensitive of issues of equality, as well as various legal reforms toward gender parity, since the early 2000s, these groups brought to light the persisting inequality that women farmers still endured. These groups can then become true space of politization, aiming at improving women's experiences on their farms. They allow women to express and share their feelings with the rest of the group. By doing so, individual experiences become collective allowing the emergence of a gender consciousness. From individual explanations to give sense to their experience, women develop their sociological imagination (reference) and give birth to collective feminine identity. However, as pointed by Comer (2017), this "conscientization" seldom lead to feminist claims. In fact, if the process at stake in the context of these professional groups can be seen

as means to renegotiate gender norms, they do not fully question these inequalities. Women still maintain a discourse of non-interchangeability of men and women's role (explained by physical and psychological differences) and continue to claim their role of helper, supporting their husband, and therefore contributing to the economic viability of the farm.

Agroecological transition: what are the changes related to work in agriculture?

Agroecological transition is often associated with changes in agricultural practices, that a more environmental-friendly way to produce, rendering farming less harmful to natural environment. However, if we adopt the viewpoint of workers/farmers, this transition implies profound work-related changes: how to perform a task, how to think about work, but also how to think about oneself in relation to one's environment, change. These changes also affect socio-professional networks and farmers' frames of references (Lamine, 2012, Chantreet *al.*, 2015, Coquil *et al.*, 2017). In the daily practice of their work, farmers develop ways of doing along with a set of knowledge and practical experiences, professional norms and values, which are coherent with the object of their work—that is what they handle on a daily basis. This pragmatic coherence, which leads to farmers' well-being while performing their daily work, is solid/well embedded and therefore difficult to change. Agroecological transition can be cost-expensive when it comes to work because it questions, and implies changes in, farmers' pragmatic coherence (Béguin, 2004). Consequently, agroecological transition is a complex process. Coquil *et al.* (2017) conceptualized this transition according to a dialogical process between what is wished for and reality, issues which arise and ways to bring solutions. This process is characterized by inconsistencies between what farmers do and what they think they are doing, by concrete difficulties/challenges, by access to new range of possibilities and of what is thinkable, and, more rarely, by external forces.

The case: Group Femmes 44

Presentation of the group

The group Femmes 44 was created in 2014 and brought together 15 women dairy farmers. Since 2014, the group has welcome 36 women whose participation in the group activities (meetings, trainings) has varied from 6 months to 6 years (Table 1). In average, women stay for two years. Fluctuation in participation can be explained by retirement, maternity leaves, or desires to attend other professional groups (for instance, desire and ability to join mixed-sex group focusing on technical issues once their feeling of legitimacy was reinforced). Overall, each meeting brought together 10 participants. In 2018, 8 women from the group participated in a non-mixed-sex 3-day training on tractor's driving and maintenance.

Half of the women involved at some point in the group became farmer through marriage. In other words, they did not intend to become a farmer, but started farming on their husband farm because of the need of labor force on the farm (generally due to the retirement of their in-laws) and because working on the farm allowed them to also care for their children. If they did not necessarily come from a farm background, they all grew up within the Loire-Atlantique department. They share the fact that they occupied low paid, low qualified jobs, requiring several hours outside the household as well as significant commuting. The other half of the women who participated in the group have slightly different characteristics. Most of them chose to farm, are in charge of their farm alone or with female partners. It is a quite heterogeneous group in terms of age (from 28 to 59), background (farm, rural or urban) or education (from technical training to higher education). They shared the fact of not feeling legitimate as farmers to the eyes of others—farmers, employees, but also family, as well as to their own eyes.

This second group of women arrived later in the group. In fact, during its first few years of existence, the group was mainly constituted of the previous group of women. The vast majority of the women who have been involved in the group work on their farm with their husband and have an official status (mostly co-operator).

Engagement in agriculture	Population by category	Mean date of birth (minimum/maximum)	Native from agriculture	Administrative status in 2020	Production in 2020	Diploma	Average time spent in the dynamic of groupe femmes 44 (years)
By wedding	16	1970 (1959/1986)	4 from 16	2 collaborating spouses 14 farm managers	8 organic dairy cows 7 conventional dairy cows 1 vegetables production	7 professional certificate 4 baccalaureate 2 baccalaureate+2 1 baccalaureate+3 et 4 1 baccalaureate+5 et plus	2,4
By choice	19	1978 (1955/1992)	6 from 19	18 farm managers 1 employee	14 organic dairy cows 1 vegetables production 2 berry producers	1 baccalaureate 10 baccalaureate+2 1 baccalaureate+3 et 4 5 baccalaureate+5 et plus	2

Table 1. Main characteristics of women constituting Group femme 44

Motivations for joining the group

When we focus on women farmers' motivations to join Groupe Femmes 44, two reasons appear: the need to stop isolation and the need to acquire technical knowledge. For instance, Clothide explains, "especially because, us, women, we are isolated" and adds "I did not have contacts with others". The need to create social bonds coincides with gain of independence of children. Three out of the five women interviewed found in the farming profession and in farming with their husband, a means to balance professional and family lives. If taking care of their children gave sense to their professional involvement in the family farm, it also takes up a lot of their time and fulfills their needs of social interactions. As children grows older and become more independent, women farmers look for other means to socialize. In fact, research analyzing experiences of women in agriculture showed that the long period of modernization of agriculture highly contributed to their isolation (Lagrave, 1988). In fact, modernisation led to the disappearance of feminine socialization places, contributed to women's exclusion from production spaces and confinement to the domestic sphere.

Women interviewed acknowledged the fact that they had more time to get involved on their farm, but mentioned the lack of technical knowledge and resources. Four women farmers interviewed did not receive initial training in agriculture and three of them did not even grow up on a farm, giving them a limited professional capital. Therefore, as mentioned by Eliane, non-mixed-sex agricultural professional groups stand as means to answer at the same time the need to create social bonds and to acquire more technical knowledge: "we got out of the farm, it created a network, (...) and, also, we received technical training on milking or heifers' management." Involvement in Groupe Femmes 44 contributed to the acquisition of technical resources allowing women to be more involved, professionally on their farm.

Among the 5 women interviewed, one stands out regarding her motivation to join the group. Marie, a women in her early thirties, not from a farm background, in fact defining herself as "a city girl" (she leaved during several years in a nearby city), admits that she did not "know much about farming" before settling on her husband's family farm. When she arrived on this farm, where her in-laws were still leaving, she had to learn not only to cope with life on a farm in a rural setting, but also to manage her (sometimes conflictual) relationship with her in-laws. When she decided to work on the farm with her husband, she immediately aspired to have an official status as well as an activity of her own. To that

end, she started processing part of the milk into ice-cream sold directly on the farm and to local businesses. Giraud and Dufour (2012) showed that this search for autonomy characterizes spouses who have an education and a cultural capital giving them resources necessary to create their space within the family farm. However, even if Marie chose to develop her own activity on the farm, the perspective of working on a daily basis with her husband was a source of interrogations, as well as how to balance professional and private lives. She turned to the Groupe Femmes 44 in order to benefit from the experiences of other women farmers on how to manage working with spouse on the family farm.

The different dynamics of the group

Analysis of the various documents produced during the animation of *Groupe Femme 44* shows the chronological emergence of 4 evolving themes reflecting the changing needs and questions of the participants regarding their place on their farm in general and their professional implication in particular

Theme 1: Acquiring skills to foster dialogue with (male) partner

The first dynamic to appear (and present until 2019) focuses on the need to gain skills to enter into dialogue with their (male) partner. This dynamic is reflected, among other things, in training in communication, and aims to establish the legitimacy of women on their farm. This dynamic stems from women's perception that if they want to be more involved on their farm by participating more in production activities or decision-making, they need to learn how to communicate with their male partner: "it's to our responsibility to make our own space on the farm, (...) by understanding the men we are working with and by trying to change them." This very pragmatic premise shows that women believe that change can only be brought by themselves, not their male partners. It also suggests unequal power.

Theme 2: Finding solutions to improve women's working conditions

Started since the end of 2014, several reflections / exchanges then have taken place focusing on improving working conditions for women farmers. We named this second dynamic "Finding solutions to improve women's working conditions". In the different meetings and workshops organized by the Groupe Femmes 44, women express the fact that their professional involvement on the farm is often considered secondary by their male partners. They are often obliged to adjust their routine to allow the continuity of their male partners' activities. Women farmers consider improving their work conditions on three different levels: (1) the recognition of the invisible, but nevertheless necessary, work of women, (2) the interest of fitting out work stations so that their morphology and physical capacity are not limiting, and (3) the acquisition of skills and know-how allowing them to preserve their mental and physical balance.

The different minutes of meetings express, among women farmer, difficulties to be able to be a creative force regarding organization/layout of their workstation. Some even express a complete lack of knowledge regarding the different options available when it comes to farm equipment (milking machines, barriers and gates, tractors and other machines, etc.). Acquisition of this knowledge as well as knowledge and skills on how to care for one's body under farm work conditions and how to preserve one's mental health, is permitted by different trainings on working posture, body warm-up, but also special training aiming at providing tools to prevent stress and promote health through healthy diets.

Theme 3: Acquiring technical skills

From 2017, a new dynamic has emerged around the acquisition of technical and practical skills in order to take part in productive activities. Women express the desire to gain such skills in order to take part in

the making of strategic farm decisions. From that period, workshops and meetings have focused on animal behavior, nutrition and care, but also on the use and maintenance of tractors and other agricultural machineries. This dynamic reflects a strong desire of women farmer to be considered as legitimate professionals to the eyes of their (male) partners and other professionals.

In addition, during the second semester of 2017, communication trainings on how to create dialogue with partners (Cf. Theme 1) are replaced by training on collaborative farm management. The focus is not only on how to communicate with one's partner, it is also on how to jointly manage the farm. This focus can be illustrated by the title of the different workshops: "tools for joint-decision," "mutual consent management," or "acknowledgement of the skills and values of each farm partner."

Theme 4: Politization of actions of Groupe Femmes 44

Finally, the last dynamic appearing from the beginning of 2019 has been that of the feminist commitment of women farmers. During the different meetings and workshops, time was devoted to discuss the political role of Groupe Femmes 44. Some women farmers then wished to publicize the empowering effects of these single-sex interactions. Others, however, clearly display reluctance to the political dimension by arguing that these exchanges had essentially reinsurance effects between peers. Meetings and workshops minutes revealed disagreement and conflicts within the group, especially around whether or not identifying the group agenda with a feminist agenda. Some women were reluctant to use the term "feminist" which they found "aggressive" and incompatible with their experience. Despite these disagreements, and after the departure of the more reluctant women, a two-day public workshop was organized during the Fall of 2019 focusing on "Women in agriculture and in rural space."

The role of Groups Femmes 44 in bringing changes

"Power with": the benefits of the group

When it comes to changes in power relations in general, or *empowerment* in particular, the collective dimension appears significant. Previous research on women farmers' empowerment suggest that women farmers can gain power through establishing bonds with other women in the contact of agricultural organizations or networks (see for instance, Annes and Wright 2015 and 2017). In the same way, Groupe Femmes 44 played the same role for women interviewed. First, it allowed not only "the establishment of strong bonds of friendship," it mainly gives an opportunity to meet "women farmers who share similar experiences." This mirroring effect allows participants to collectively become conscient that the uncomfortable situations they endure on their farm are not fair. By listening to other women farmers' testimony, Aude realized that she was "just serving as a stopgap" on the farm and to admit that "this type of questions, I had never asked them to myself." For her, the group stands for "a place of expression allowing to verbalize something" and then "to give the strength to speak about it with the right persons," in her case, her brother.

Participation in the group contributes to the emergence of a "gender awareness" (Comer 2017). However, participation in the group does not only allow to name and become conscious of the existence of gender inequalities, it also gives the possibility to acquire technical skills: "[I realized] other women were doing other stuff than milking, they were more assertive on their farm, and that there are stuff on grass management, on topics like the milking room, on work conditions." If in the context of workshops organized by the group technical training are available, informal discussions also provide women with an opportunity to learn about other trainings organized by other mixed-sex professional groups, and to register together. In other contexts, several studies showed that women farmers can be reluctant in

going to agricultural spaces dominated by men (Annes et Wright, 2017 ; Sachs *et al.*, 2016 ; Trauger, 2004). In these very masculine space (whether it is the ag cooperative to deliver crops or the general assembly of a farmer union), women generally feel excluded, not being taken seriously or that they are not perceived by others as legitimate. Participating in Groupe Femmes 44 can act as a catalyst for joining other professional trainings.

Professional evolution

Questioning traditional division of labor

Looking at tasks performed by men and women on their farms, when the women farmers we interviewed started to farm (or before attending Groupe Femmes 44), we note a traditional division of labor corresponding to the one usually observed on dairy farms (Giraud and Dufour, 2012). Four out of the five women interviewed entered in a relationship with a dairy farmer and live on the farm where professional and domestic spheres are blurred (the fifth women started farming with her brother and does not live on the farm). They chose a lifestyle allowing them to reconcile family life and participation to farm work. Family life is characterized by (1) a significant investment of their husband in farm work (extended range of working hours) but a relatively low investment within the household, and (2) an implicit, and by default, transfer of domestic work to women. Men are in charge of making strategic decisions, they feed the animals, and do all field/crop-related works. Women participate in the milking, care and feed calves, as well as being in charge of administrative work. For women, the nature of the work they perform is influenced by the need to carry out domestic and family work, as well as taking care of tasks which do not imply being away for too long from the household (paper work, milking, and care for calves). Their participation to farm work is not understood as “production work” and remain invisible. Women can also be mobilized depending on special needs (fencing, delivering crops to the cooperative, bringing water to a pasture, etc.). However, they tend to minimize this involvement, as shown by the following quote:

- It was like that during at least 10 years [traditional division of labor]. Well, in fact, I also helped on other stuff...when there is need to move to cows from one pasture to another...I would drive the small tractor. I started to move the water tank. But there were only small errands like that.
- Well, moving the water tank does not look like something easy!
- Yes, that's right, but...you know, it was not really on the main road, I only took small country road. There was not too much traffic.

Women's farm work is intended to support the work of their (male) partner. This interweaving between family and professional lives questions the nature of what is constructed as agricultural work. In that regard, it might be relevant to consider tasks performed by women in the domestic spheres as agricultural work since it is essential to the overall operation of the farm. Groupe Femmes 44 could constitute an empowering space in which collective consciousness on this issue might emerge.

Being in charge of new activities

As we showed in the previous section, women farmers interviewed acquired technical knowledge following their participation in different workshops, organized by Groupe Femmes 44 or encouraged and motivated because of their involvement with the group. Groupe Femmes 44 gave them the necessary resources they were lacking to create a place of their own, to acquire legitimacy on their farm and to be in charge of productive activities. For instance, Clothilde, decided to take charge of heifers. She explained: “the group helped me understand I could do other things than caring for the calves and

milking the cows.” Following the different workshops and trainings she attended, Eliane admits that she “learned how to better know the farm, to go into the pasture and check upon the grass.” She concluded: “I learned to be a farmer.” Moving to an intensive farming system to an extensive one (grass based system), controlling grass growth has become a task she equally shares with her husband: “checking upon the grass, it’s me, it’s my husband, I think I have been doing it more than him, especially since we transitioned to organic.” For that matter, when they decided to convert their farming system to an organic system, she is the one who contacted and talked with the extension specialist. She was a key agent of this strategic decision. This evolution in the nature of their farm work is motivated by values of self-fulfillment and equality, as well as the changing structure of their family (children becoming more independent and requiring less constant care) or the changing structure of agriculture. In fact, when it comes to farm revenue, systems based upon the maximization of production have shown their limits. It is noteworthy that, at first, women interviewed progressively built a space of their own on their farm, but without challenging the overall farming system.

However, through their involvement in Groupe Femmes 44 (and possibly other groups), they kept on acquiring new resources (knowledge and know-how): technical workshops, experts and extension specialist conferences. These new resources enlarge their vision and understanding of agriculture. They introduced them to new agroecological practices. Thanks to the different communication workshops they attended (e.g. breeding of calves, heifers, grazing management ...), they felt able to start a dialogue with their (male) partner (husband or brother). They started to question professional standards. In fact, without entering into ecological convictions, they gradually manage to change (i) their own ways of doing things, reconciling them step by step with their ways of thinking, (ii) their husband's ways of doing things (reduction of use of inputs, increase in the share of grass in the cow's diet ...) and (iii) their farm towards more self-sufficient systems. This desire to encourage agroecological changes was motivated by: (1) a desire to care for their partner (husband or brother) and for themselves by reducing their workload (which was achieved by reducing cattle size) and work-related risks on human health (achieved by reducing the use of chemicals); (2) a desire to care for their animals by stopping practices perceived as “non-natural” (drenching, over use of antibiotics) and wide spread in conventional agriculture, and (3) a desire to create self-sufficient and autonomous farm systems which would stabilize or improve farm revenue.

Well-being and satisfaction in work

Of course, if some women farmers interviewed were able to bring concrete agroecological changes on their farm, it is not the case for all of them. This « new » agency should be understood as a process or a continuum. Among our 5 interviewees, two of them acknowledge the fact that their ability to take decisions remains limited. However, they admit that, thanks to their involvement in Groupe Femmes 44, changes in their relationship to their male partners occurred. At least, they can now discuss and give their opinion on technical matter. If this lack of consideration when it come to technical matters can be a source of frustration, overall, the five interviewees express satisfaction in their work.

All of them feel valued and state that they have found legitimacy on their farm. Eliane, who now takes part of technical decision, explained: “in a way, it gives value. That’s what I was missing...being recognized. My husband understood that, otherwise, I did not see any more interest [in just following orders]”. For Aude, even her ability to influence strategic decisions taken by her partner, being a member of Groupe Femmes 44 allow her to express what was just not right for her in the daily practice of her work. Dialogue, which did not exist before, now occurs with her partner. When she speaks about her first years on the farm and the type of work she was conducting, she remembers particularly caring for the calves and cleaning boxes. “Unsatisfied,” “hard,” “tough” are the words she uses. She even

confessed that, at one point, she thought it would “kill [her].” Today, when she speaks about her daily work, another rhetoric appears. The notion of “freedom” is pregnant, being able « to organize her schedule” give her satisfaction. The notion of “meaning” is essential: “I work with living things, I raise cows, I grow seeds, I welcome people on my farm, I train interns. All of that gives meaning to what I do”. Reflecting on how her participation of the group affecting her professional life, she concluded without hesitation: “without the group, I would no longer be a farmer.”

Questioning traditional gender dynamics

For our 5 interviewees, participation in Groupe Femmes des CIVAM 44 legitimated their involvement on the farm. As mentioned previously, it helped them to put words on the gender inequalities they had endured on their farm. Some of them decided to act upon these inequalities in order to stop them. Marie explains that the group gave her the courage and strength to “*tell things*,” to say, for instance: “*stop, no more, I don’t want that to happen*.” Two situations are very telling. In the first one, she was back from a non-mixed workshop to learn how to drive a tractor, when her husband asked her (“*as a test*,” as she said) to bring a load of crops to the nearby coop. She explained:

When I arrived there, there was a local farmer, a real asshole... He saw me maneuvering the tractor. He came to me and asked: “do you need help?” I did not know what it produced inside myself, but something big! I said: “No, no. I can manage.” I took my time, and I did it on my own. I was able to assert myself at this very moment, and I don’t think I would have done in a few years ago. The Groupe Femme and the workshop made me realize I was able to.”

The second situation mentioned by Marie also coincides with her return from an event organized by Groupe Femme 44. Whereas her husband, their employee and herself were moving heifers from one field to another, because of one moment of inattention, she let one heifer escape. Irritated, her husband insulted her in front of their employee. Consequently, she decided to leave the field, go back to the farm and do other shores. Later, when she met her husband, she confronted him. She told him that she could not tolerate this kind of attitude, that he had to learn to control his anger, that she did not want to endure it, especially in a professional context. When she remembers that particular event, she realizes that “*it is the power of the group that give [me] the strength to say what I had to say*.” These two instances show that participation in the group contributes to give women farmer the ability to become agent of change on their own farm and in other agricultural professional spaces (such as the farm coop). Of course, it does not mean that it puts an end to gender inequality. It suggests, before all, that it allows women farmers to start a dialogue on their farm (their workplace), which might lead to more social justice.

Conclusion

Group Femme 44 represents a socio-professional environment allowing women farmers to discuss, to put words and find technical and communicational answers, organization as well as social issues, and consequently to reach the uniqueness of their work situation. This group allows Eliane, Fabienne and Clothilde to discover the existence, the relevance, and the more natural dimension of self-sufficient and autonomous systems. Group discussions also allows Marie and Aude to question the organization of work and the gender division of labor on their farms. Consequently, our results point to the fact that for women farmer working on farms following conventional systems, Group Femme 44 stands as a key resource to foster professional transition toward self-sufficient and autonomous systems. For the women

who were already involved in such systems, Group Femme 44 contributes to the transition toward more equitable system by questioning work organization.

From a more theoretical perspective, the experiences of these women farmers supplement the conceptualization of the notion of professional transition developed by Coquil *et al.*, 2017 focused on farmers' professional transitions toward self-sufficient and autonomous systems. Developmental processes at stake among women farmers in the context of the agroecological transition are initiated by accessing the unthinkable. By interacting with women farmers already involved under self-sufficient and autonomous systems, they are confronted with alternative ways to think and practice agriculture, but also alternative ways to think their position and their role within society.

Finally, our research raises the issue of gender equality in the context of the agroecological transition. In fact, within the agroecological social movement, women farmers' claims for gender equity is not self-evident (RESEAU INTERNATIONAL FEMINISME ET AGROECOLOGIE, 2020). Within social organizations (unions, political or grass-root organizations), the movement toward the acknowledgment and equality of women's rights represents a specific issue. If the agroecological transition is necessary to set up autonomous and self-sufficient agricultural systems preserving natural resources, it must also encourage the creation of equitable systems which recognize and support the social and historical involvement of women.

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