



Project no.: 022682
Project acronym: So Far
Project full title: Social Services in
Multifunctional Farms ('Social Farming')

**SPECIFIC SUPPORT ACTION
PRIORITY [8.1.B.1.1] [Modernisation
and sustainability of agriculture and forestry, including their
multifunctional role in order to ensure the sustainable
development and promotion of rural areas]**

**Deliverables D12 – "Gender Issues in Social Farming" by
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Due Date of deliverable:
Actual submission date: M24

Start date of contract: 1st may, 2006
Duration: 33 months

Lead contractor for this deliverable: UCD (Ireland)

**Project co-funded by the European Commission within
the Sixth Framework programme (2002-2006)**

Dissemination level: **PP**

Gender Issues in Social Farming – Insights from the SoFar Project

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1. Introduction

Social Farming is an issue that crosses many sectoral boundaries – but clearly agriculture and social care are central concerns. The rationale for analysing gender issues within the arena of social farming in general (and the SoFar project in particular) can be located in a wide-ranging body of academic and policy literature. In both of these arenas, recurring themes include the feminisation of the care-sector workforce; gender equality in the community and voluntary sector; the invisibility of care labour (both paid and unpaid) and the commodification of care (Armstrong and Armstrong (2004); Daly and Rake (2003); European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions, (2006); Ungerson (1997)). Regarding agriculture specifically, a variety of gender equality issues arise in relation to professional status; recognition; visibility and contribution to the sector (European Commission, 2002).

Social Farming initiatives across Europe are characterised by diversity in terms of their stages and trajectories of development; their focus; their organisational structure; their scale of operation; their regulatory environment – among other features. In addition, for many countries/regions involved, the SoFar project represented the first attempt to determine the nature and extent of social farming initiatives. Consequently, the availability and quality of supporting data to examine cross-cutting issues such as gender in social farming must be seen as a constraint on the analysis. For these reasons, the following discussion should be interpreted as exploratory and impressionistic - rather than definitive or conclusive, with the main purpose being to raise issues which warrant further examination.

2. Rationale and Context

One of the recurring themes in the relevant literature is the analysis of care labour as women's work. The approach taken in much of this work can be summarized in the following quote by Armstrong and Armstrong (2004)

“Care work is women's work. Paid and unpaid, located at home, in

voluntary organisations or in the labour force, the overwhelming majority of care is provided by women. It is often invisible, usually accorded little value and only sometimes recognised as skilled.” (Armstrong and Armstrong, 2004: 4)

However, Daly and Rake (2003) argue that the feminisation of care has not been contained within the family, but has also been reflected in paid care work. As the sector has grown, women have formed an ever larger majority of paid care workers. They argue that in keeping with the low value assigned to care-giving in the private sphere, this sector is characterised by low pay and poor working conditions, devaluing the value of care economic and employment terms. A recent report by the European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions (2006) reinforced the point that across all Member States, the care sector workforce is predominantly female and that encouraging a more gender-balanced social care workforce could therefore increase the overall supply of workers. Echoing findings elsewhere in the literature, they note that the perception of the skills associated with care provision as “womens’ skills” negatively influences the pay offered by the sector.

Another related theme in the literature is what Ungerson (1997) refers to as the “commodification of care” and the dissolving of the boundaries between private and public care, whereby welfare states underwrite the provision of care through cash subventions both to carers and care recipients.

There is also a growing focus in the literature on what Hochschild (2000) has called “global care chains” which analyses the increasing role of female migrant labour, frequently from transition or low-income economies in the provision of care services in high-income countries.

The literature on gender equality issues within the community and voluntary sector is also of relevance to the analysis of social farming, given the role and importance of this sector in the provision of such services across Europe. A common theme in this literature is the depiction of women as the ‘mainstay’ of voluntary social services and community development projects, and the perception of this work as a “natural” extension of their caring work in the home (National Development Plan Gender Equality Unit, 2002). With regard to paid employment in the sector, women are over-represented among the part-time labour force in the sector and significantly under-

represented at senior management/decision-making levels. Another recurring theme within the relevant literature is the persistence of a “male culture” at decision-making levels in the community/voluntary sector which serves as a barrier to womens’ participation and influence (Braithwaite, 1998).

While the above discussion has focused on gender issues related to the *provision* of care services, there are also insights on gender issues and the *use* or *uptake* of care services and much of this literature comes from the disability studies movement. In part this literature critiques the over-focusing of attention on the “carer” rather than the cared-for and the paucity of information from a gender perspective on recipients’ experience of care services (Morris, 1998; National Disability Authority, 2002). Another theme that emerges is the difficulties for recipients of care services to balance their own roles as care-givers. For example, Morris (1998) in her research with women with a disability found that a reliance on services (social services and health authorities) did not generally enable women to participate in personal relationships or engage in work or social activities outside their home in a way they would choose. For service-users who see their role within their household as that of the homemaker/or child-carer, the inability to get the help they need to continue this role is a particularly oppressive experience. She concludes that women with a disability are commonly represented as passive recipients of care yet the role of caregiver is an important one to many.

3. Gender Issues and the Provision of Social Farming Services

Notwithstanding the caveat already noted on the quality of data emerging from the SoFar investigations, we can nonetheless provide some insights into gender-related issues and provision of services in the social farming arena. Insights from various dimensions of the SoFar work (i.e. information contained in the national/regional State of the Art reports; national/regional case studies; national/regional/EU-level platforms) can be used to address some of the aspects of the previous discussion. While the quantitative data collected in the course of the SoFar analysis is relatively sparse, it suggests an even balance between men and women in terms of how social farming initiatives are staffed. However, it does not provide insights into different roles for men/women as service providers (junior or senior role; agricultural or social care role; managerial, technical or administrative role etc.) or the type of initiative concerned (family-farm based; institutional setting; large/small scale etc.)

Table 1. Gender Profile of Service Providers in SoFar Analysis

Country/Region	Gender Balance - Staff Profile in Initiatives:	Comments
Ireland	55% Male, 45% Female	Based on analysis of 15 SOFAR case studies Discussion in State of Art Report
Slovenia	30% Male, 70% Female	Based on analysis of a number of SOFAR case studies Discussion in State of Art Report
Netherlands	60% Male 40% Female	Based on analysis of a number of SOFAR case studies Discussion in State of Art Report
Belgium	50% Male 50% Female	Based on analysis of some SOFAR case studies Discussion in State of Art Report

Additional insights that are more qualitative in nature can be obtained from the national/regional State of the Art reports. Some of the relevant quotations from these Reports are provided in Box 1. For example, in the case of Italy, the “typical” worker in agricultural social co-operatives is described as “young, female and qualified” and it is estimated that women account for approximately 70% of the workforce in this sector. In Slovenia, the State of the Art report noted that on approximately 70% of care Farms, it is women who take responsibility for the service-users. In the Netherlands, the high proportion of females among volunteer workers in social farming was noteworthy. In some instances (Germany, Flanders), where social

farming activities were differentiated between those that were strongly “agricultural-based” and those which were “care-based”, female staff were more likely to be assigned to the latter category of work.

It appears that women are highly visible and perhaps “over-represented” among the rank-and-file workforce in many social farming initiatives. The extent to which this visibility and level of participation is mirrored in other related arenas – such as networking, advocacy, engagement with policy makers etc. - is an important issue, particularly given the stated objectives of the SoFar project. These include the development of networking mechanisms between practitioners/service-providers and researchers as well as measures to support the design of relevant policies for social/care farming at regional and European level. While not exhaustive or comprehensive, Table 2 provides some insights into the gender breakdown of participation in various platform events undertaken in the course of the SoFar work.

Table 2. Gender-Based Participation in National, Regional and EU-Level Platform Events (SoFar Project)

	Male	Female	Comments
Ireland National Platform	75%	25%	1 st Platform
	51%	49%	2 nd Platform
Flanders Regional Platform	65%	35%	2 nd Platform
Germany National Platform	80%	20%	2 nd Platform
Italy National Platform	70%	30%	2 nd Platform
Slovenia National Platform	46%	54%	2 nd Platform
1 st EU Platform	78%	22%	Invited stakeholders
2 nd EU Platform	74%	26%	Invited stakeholders

Box 1: Gender and the Provision of Social Farming Services – Insights from SoFar

“If we should draw a profile of who is working today in social co-operation no doubt that the main features are: female, young and qualified”The percentage of women among the total number of operators in Italian social cooperation is about 70%... “Part-time” is the typology of contract in which the percentage of women is higher; however high percentages can be found also in the case of full-time personnel.”

Italy - State of the Art Report

In approximately 70% of Care Farms.....the women take responsibility for the service-users and care side.

Slovenia - State of the Art Report

In 2006 a survey was held among 20 care farmers to get information about gender aspects. On 18 out of the 20 farms, the farmer or farmers’ wife were responsible for taking care of the clients. On 12 farms they both participated in care giving tasks; on 3 farms only the farmer took care of the clients and on 3 other farms, it was the farmers’ wife taking care of the client. On average, the farmer spend 34 hours per week on care activities and the farmers’ wife 26 hours. We noted that almost all volunteers are female.

The Netherlands - State of the Art Report

Concerning gender issues the farms were asked about the sex of their co-workers. Nearly every project said that there are less than 50 % women (0, 30% or 50%) who are working in agricultural activities. But in care activities the share of female workers is very often more than 50 %. Pedagogical work with children or young people or care for senior citizens or mental disabled is often a domain of women. Whereas people working with drug addicts or people in social need is often done by male supervision.

Germany - State of the Art Report

Coaching the clients is mainly a male task, taking into account that at most care farms care has essentially focused labour as a therapeutic element. If target groups with more care needs (like elderly people) are brought into the picture, the role of farmers’ wives is expected to increase.

Belgium - State of the Art Report

In terms of people involved with care services that have a Social Farming element to it, from a care providers point of view, the staff an even mix of both genders, perhaps the equal involvement of men might reflect a bias due to men being more associated with farming, ground based work. However of the case studies considered, most managers were male.

Ireland - State of the Art Report

One relevant indicator is the gender breakdown of participation in various platform events organised in the course of the SoFar work. In the case of the first European platform, 22% of the “invited” participants (6 of the 27) were female, while in the second EU platform, 26% (8 of the 31 invited participants) were female. If the national SoFar . One relevant indicator is the gender breakdown of participation in various platform events organised in the course of the SoFar work. In the case of the first European platform, 22% of the “invited” participants (6 of the 27) were female, while in the second EU platform, 26% (8 of the 31 invited participants) were female. If the research project teams are included as participants at these events, the proportions rise to 31% and 33% respectively, reflecting the gender balance among the research contingent involved.

Available data on the gender composition of the National Platforms (NPs) suggest a more mixed picture. Female participation rates at these events ranged from 20% - 25%, (Germany 2nd NP, Ireland 1st NP); 30% - 35% (Flanders 2nd NP, Italy 2nd NP) to almost 50% or over (Slovenia 2nd NP, Ireland 2nd NP).

While it is not possible to generalise from such limited evidence, it is worth noting that the relevant academic and policy literature (relating to agriculture; social care; community/voluntary sector) makes frequent reference to women’s under-representation at strategic/decision-making/policy-influencing levels in these sectors (European Commission, 2002; National Development Plan Gender Equality Unit, 2002; European Foundation for Living and Working Conditions, 2006).

4. Gender Issues and the Uptake of Social Farming Services

While the above discussion has focused on gender issues related to the provision of social farming services, there are also insights on gender issues and the uptake of social farming services from various dimensions of the SoFar work.

Again, the same “health warning” attaches to the quality and extent of the data available.

Turning first to the quantitative data obtained from the national/regional case studies and the State of the Art Reports, Table 3 shows the general picture which is that service-users are predominantly male – approximately 75% in many cases (Ireland, France, Netherlands and Slovenia) and somewhat higher in Belgium. However, once again, the sparse nature of the quantitative data

means it is not possible to identify gender differentials in the type of service used ((family-farm based; institutional setting; large/small scale etc.); the nature of the service provided; the activities/roles ascribed to the service-user or the nature of the service-user’s disability.

Table 3. Gender Profile of Service-Users in SoFar Analysis

Country/Region	Gender Balance Of Service-users	Comments
Ireland	75% Male 25% Female	Based on analysis of 15 SOFAR case studies Discussion in State of Art Report
Slovenia	75% Male 25% Female	Based on analysis of a number of SOFAR case studies Discussion in State of Art Report
France	75% Male 25% Female	Based on analysis of a number of SOFAR case studies
Netherlands	75% Male 25% Female	Based on analysis of a number of SOFAR case studies Discussion in State of Art Report
Belgium	80% Male 20% Female	Based on analysis of a number of SOFAR case studies Discussion in State of Art Report

Again, additional insights that are more qualitative in nature can be obtained from the national/regional State of the Art reports. Some of the relevant quotations from these Reports are provided in Box 2. These may help to shed some light on the gender profile of service-users – which appears to exhibit a common pattern across most of the countries/regions involved in the SoFar analysis. While there was limited focus on this issue in the course discussions with stakeholders and the compilation of the State of the Art reports, service providers and SoFar national teams did voice some explanations about the prevalence of men as service-users. In some instances, the tendency

to ascribe gendered work roles in relation to farming was put forward as a reason – citing the perception that farming work was “preferred by” or “more suitable for” men rather than women.

Box 2: Gender and Uptake of Social Farming Services – Insights from SoFar

“What is interesting to note however is the gender profile of participants. There is a much higher involvement of males in Social Farming activities in most cases, in the order of 75% plus male participation versus 25% and lower among females. This may be accounted for by a number of factors. Male service-users may be steered in this direction due to cultural biases of gendered work roles in relation to farming. Equally many female service-users may not feel that some of the work is appropriate to them.....

.....A particularly interesting finding was that the lack of childcare services may hinder involvement in some services. Within residential drug and alcohol treatment centres the lack of availability of childcare services is believed to be a major barrier to females who are trying to receive treatment. This could explain the bias in the profile of participants in these initiatives, where women comprise less than 10% of service-users in these centres

Ireland State of the Art Report

“Many projects did not give answer to the question of the sex of their clients. Most of the farms who answered had clearly less than 50% female clients.

Germany State of the Art Report

.....Concerning disadvantaged persons, according to some interviewees, agriculture would be preferred by (and/or more suited for) men rather than women. However, there is not sufficient evidence to make generalisations.

Italy State of the Art Report

.....The clients are also predominantly male. This makes social farming in Flanders a particularly masculine activity.

Belgium State of the Art Report

The 2006 survey among 20 care farmers to get information about gender aspects shows that on all care farms that participated in this survey, the majority of clients is male. The percentage of female clients varies between 0 and 49% on these care farms. The average is 20%.

Netherlands State of the Art Report

An additional factor mentioned in discussions with service providers is the difficulty for service-users to balance their uptake of care services with their own roles as care-givers. For example, some service providers stated that within residential drug and alcohol treatment centres, the lack of availability of childcare services is believed to be a major barrier to women who are trying to receive treatment. Programmes with residential programmes from 1 month upwards to a year may be effectively inaccessible to women due to the lack of childcare provision. This may be a factor in explaining the gender differentials in the uptake of such services, where – in some countries/regions – women comprise less than 10% of service-users. Another salient factor cited frequently by service providers is the higher incidence of certain types of intellectual disability (eg. autism) among the male population.

5. Concluding Remarks

As previously noted, one of the defining characteristics of social farming is its diversity in terms of the scope, scale, organisation and development trajectories of the initiatives associated with it across Europe. In addition, in many cases, the SoFar project can be seen as a preliminary extent to map the key actors/initiatives engaged in social farming initiatives in different countries. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that there is a dearth of reliable data on which to base an analysis of gender issues as they relate to social farming and the foregoing discussion should be seen in that context. Because of the “pioneering” and exploratory nature of much of the SoFar work, it can provide only partial answers to questions such as: whether there are different roles for men/women as service providers in social farming; whether there are gender differences in the uptake of certain types of initiatives and if so how can they be explained; what is the gender profile of service-users and providers across different countries/regions; are there variations in such profiles and if so, how can they be explained.

Within the SoFar work, the desire to receive recognition and the ability to influence policy/decision-making processes have emerged as central challenges for all those who engage in it. This is highly relevant given that less empowered/marginalised groups and people of low contractual capacity are such key stakeholders. For many of the service users associated with social farming, there are significant challenges in trying to influence policies and practices in “conventional” ways and in bringing insights from their own lived experience to bear on the policy-making process in meaningful ways. This issue has a particular

resonance for researchers in developing and using participatory processes that can act as a means of accessing other people's worlds; making those worlds accessible to others and putting people in charge of how they represent themselves and how they depict their situation.

However, from a gender perspective, what is at issue is whether such challenges are likely to be experienced differentially by both men and women engaged with social farming (either as service-users or as service-providers). To borrow a phrase from the disability literature, it may be useful to explore the concept of "double disadvantage"¹. In this context, such an analysis might consider the extent to which the marginalisation/exclusion experienced by actors in social farming – whether as service-users or providers of "care labour" in different spheres – is compounded by issues related to their gender.

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