



**Current Realities and Challenges in Agriculture:
Perspectives from Women Biodynamic Farmers in the
Field**

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June 2024

Introduction

Women are the heart of subsistence agriculture – playing an important role in the many activities of their farms and gardens. They are like the clouds that bring rain to a village down in a valley, while men are the mountain counterparts, making sure that these waters go to where they are supposed to go. Not diminishing the equally important role of men in agriculture, women have always had their place in the agricultural systems of production and their subsequent contribution to global productivity (Verschuur, 2019).

According to global statistics, sixty-three (63) percent of agricultural producers in sub-Saharan Africa are women. In the US, it is thirty-six (36) percent, while in South Asia, two-thirds of the farm workforce are women (Kelly, 2024). In relation, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations reported that between sixty (60) to eighty (80) percent of the food in developing countries is produced by women, highlighting further their valid contribution to household food security.

However, numerous studies from FAO confirm that even with this important role of women in agriculture, they still face great difficulty in access to land, inputs, and services for productivity, and even credit (Davies, 2023). That is where the importance of emphasizing Sustainable Development Goal 5 of the United Nations comes into play in the years to come for women in agriculture. Accordingly, there should be,

(a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure. (United Nations, nd)

In this regard, while there exists a plethora of studies on women in agriculture at large, there is a noticeable gap in literature specifically focused on current realities and challenges of agriculture from the perspectives of women biodynamic farmers.

Hence, this research endeavor aims to fill this void by shedding light on the unique experiences of women biodynamic farmers. By focusing on this specific niche, the researcher aspires to contribute valuable insights that can inform and support women biodynamic farmers. Furthermore, the

project seeks to enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by women in this particular sector, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and informed approach to biodynamic agricultural practices.

In essence, this research not only endeavors to address a gap in existing literature but also strives to pave the way for improved support systems for women biodynamic farmers, thereby benefiting both the individuals involved and the broader biodynamic agricultural community, 100 years after the Agricultural Course.

Biographical Inspiration

The impulse for me to choose this topic and undertake the research project, considering that there was already another topic in my mind before this, came during a transit journey to visit a friend who is into biodynamic agriculture. It was during this time that I pondered the question: "What are the current realities and challenges of agriculture from the perspective of women biodynamic farmers?"

Before this, however, the topic had already been a subject of interest for me, albeit not specifically in biodynamic agriculture, especially when I worked in an agricultural extension program in the Philippines. During my stint there, I noticed the crucial role that women play in agriculture. Because their husbands are working outside of agriculture, the women take up the part to tend to their small-scale farms, all the while taking care of the house in general. They also represent their households in attending important meetings set up by government agencies for various agricultural projects.

I can personally relate to this scenario, reflecting on my biography where I witnessed my mother and grandmother diligently maintaining our farm and some specific animals that we have. I remember my grandmother waking up during the wee hours of the morning to start the day with a coffee and would go off to the farm to start hand weeding when the maize were still young then coming back around 8 in the morning, bringing back certain vegetables from our backyard garden. I also remember joining my mother in gathering food for our cows, usually leaves from certain trees, and in the afternoon, bringing these cows to the nearby river to drink the cold and fresh water

there. These, among other personal experiences that I had, are pivotal for my desire to undertake the research project.

Inspiration from Rudolf Steiner's Agricultural Course

Early in the 20th century, contemporary profit-making agriculture and the proliferation of the use of chemicals in the field increasingly became the norm. This is what Rudolf Steiner, the creator of biodynamic farming, challenged – changing the orientation of contemporary agriculture during that time. Accordingly, in 1924, Steiner pointed out that,

Nowadays people simply think that a certain amount of nitrogen is needed for plant growth, and they imagine it makes no difference how it's prepared or where it comes from."

(Steiner, 1924b, p.10)

In the course of this materialistic age of ours, we've lost the knowledge of what it takes to continue to care for the natural world. (Steiner, 1924b, p.10)

In 1924, he delivered the Agricultural Course at Koberwitz (now Kobierzyce, Poland) in a series of eight (8) lectures on agriculture from an anthroposophical point of view during the course of ten (10) days. He envisioned an alternative agriculture, one which would "heal the earth". Steiner wrote of the subject of these lectures as,

My subject was the nature of the products supplied by agriculture and the conditions under which these products grow. These lectures aimed to arrive at such practical ideas concerning agriculture as should combine with what has already been gained through practical insight and modern scientific experiment with the spiritually scientific considerations of the subject" (Steiner, 1924d, p.9).

Steiner stressed that the ideas he presented during the Agricultural Course are neither prescriptions nor dogma, but instead, in his own words,

"The lectures should be considered first of all as hints, which for the present should not be spoken of outside this circle, but looked upon as the foundation for experiments and thus gradually brought into a form suitable for publication." (1924d, p.10).

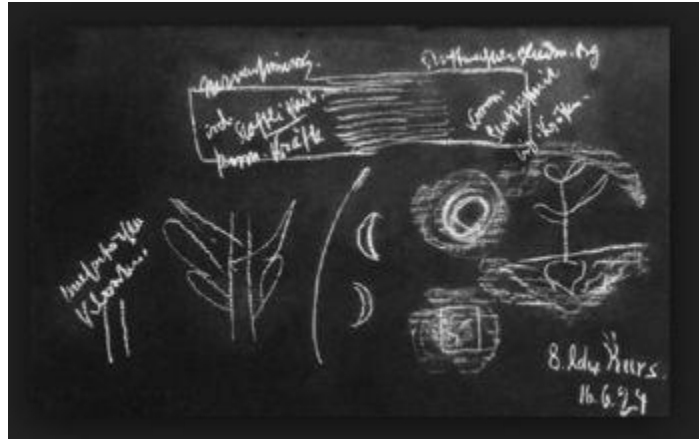


Figure 1. Blackboard drawing of Rudolf Steiner during the Agricultural Course in Koberwitz.¹

About this research, it is important to note that there were women present during this series of lectures, comprising more than a quarter of the audience (Paul, 2011). One of the women audience present is Dr. Lili Kolisko, one of the most important students of Rudolf Steiner and a prominent player in specific agricultural experiments, including a germination test to show the effect of potentized substances on living organisms (Lili Kolisko Institute for Anthroposophic Medicine).

There were also the women farmers who applied the ideas they learned during the lectures to their farms and gardens. The biodynamic horticulture school for girls in Hünibach, Switzerland is one of them, founded by Hedwig Müller, Gertrud Neuenschwander, and Ruth Pfisterer. In Germany, the LOHELAND women's settlement near Fulda founded by Louise Langgaard and Hedwig von Rohden also did the same, while in the Netherlands, Joanna Maria Tak van Poortvliet was instrumental in the establishment of Loverendale, the inaugural biodynamic farming venture, and the Demeter label. Additionally, she contributed significantly to the advancement of the Anthroposophical Society, the publication of the *Zeitschrift für soziale Dreigliederung*, and the inauguration of the pioneering anthroposophical medical clinic. (Section for Agriculture, 2023)

One hundred (100) years later after the Agricultural Course, women have become more prominent in the field of biodynamic agriculture. It is also important to note that the Demeter label, an

¹ The image is retrieved from <https://www.anthroposophie.ch/en/agriculture-nutrition/topics/articles/history/the-beginnings-of-biodynamic-agriculture.html>.

international organic quality seal that was founded in 1927, three years after the Agricultural Course, is named after the Greek goddess of fertility (Biotta, nd).

Research Objectives

The project aims to shed light on the following:

1. What was the impulse that women from around the world received for them to start or be involved in biodynamic farming?
2. What are the current realities of agriculture from the perspectives of women biodynamic farmers?
3. Based on these realities, what are the ways forward for women biodynamic farmers to achieve holistic success and empower future biodynamic farmers?

Learning Goals

With this project, the researcher seeks to provide the readers with a vivid concept of the experiences and realities of women biodynamic farmers and the crucial role they play in further shaping the wisdom of biodynamic agriculture for the future.

This research is significant in a way that its result will hopefully kick start an avenue to open the conversation of the realities and some challenges faced by women biodynamic farmers and women farmers, in general. Specifically, the research project may provide the necessary information to support policy recommendations in the future, relative to biodynamic agriculture.

Scope and Limitation of the Project

The project is conducted during the researcher's spring trimester of the Anthroposophical Studies program at the Goetheanum. Fourteen (14) women biodynamic farmers were invited to answer three open-ended questions either through face-to-face interviews or through email correspondence which are as follows: their driving force behind the decision to go into biodynamic farming, the current realities and challenges of their farms, and what are the ways forward that they can share as a woman towards a better future. Other areas of the respondent's development not mentioned are beyond the scope of the research inquiry.

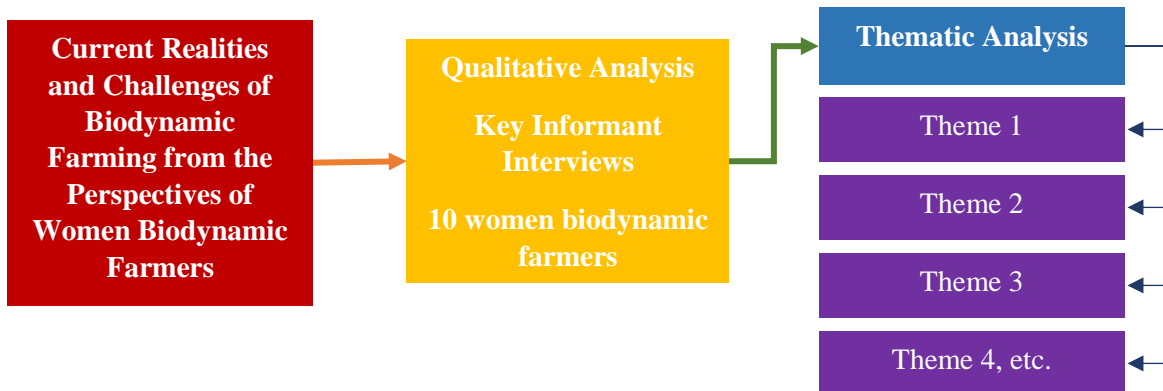


Figure 2. Methodology of the research project.

Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative research method to determine the current realities and challenges of agriculture from the perspectives of women biodynamic farmers. Key informant interviews with three (3) open-ended questions were created to extract the data which were analyzed through thematic analysis to find the common themes in the answers of the respondents. In relation, primary data from ten (10) women biodynamic farmers in different parts of the world were the source of data for the project.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to country.

Country	Number	Percentage
Switzerland	3	30%
Turkey	1	10%
Slovenia	1	10%
Egypt	1	10%
Ecuador	1	10%
Japan	1	10%
Netherlands	1	10%
USA	1	10%
Total	10	100%

Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation of Data

This section of the research project presents the results of the data gathered by the researcher through email interviews and face-to-face interviews with women involved in biodynamic agriculture around the world.

The Driving Forces To Go Into Biodynamic Agriculture

- **Early Immersion to Nature and Agriculture**

Several respondents have attributed their exposure to nature at an early age as the driving force in biodynamic agriculture. According to one respondent, she grew up in a

“House [that] had a large garden with various trees and a pond, so as a small child I had a rich natural environment. In other words, I had been doing things similar to Goethe's nature observation since childhood. It seemed like I was surrounded by many natural beings.”

Another respondent said that every summer, as a child, she visited the Alps which connects her with nature, and she carried that with her growing up, in a way that she feels happy when she is outdoors and with nature. Moreover, one respondent, she was surrounded by the Anthroposophic philosophy growing up, owing to the fact that her father is a biodynamic farmer himself.

- **Education Foundations**

For another respondent, she researched and studied on her own how to improve their farm cultivation. It led to her learning the agricultural practices that their Andean ancestors practiced and eventually began her fascination with biodynamic agriculture. Relatedly, one woman biodynamic farmer answered that she met biodynamic agriculture, Rudolf Steiner, and Anthroposophy in the middle of an oak tree forest in 2015 while she was learning about organic agriculture.

- **Gender Roles and Heritage**

This theme emerged during the analysis because of the following: one respondent said that their farm has a long tradition of it being maintained by women, and another one said that she grew up with parents who are into biodynamic agriculture which led her to decide that going into the same practice will make her appreciate more the land that she is living, while another one said that while her grandparents have a livestock farm, there was no succession opportunity for her, which is mainly because of her being too young and her as a woman. For the latter, this became an opportunity for her to pursue a different path altogether, into biodynamic farming.

- **Transition from Conventional to Biodynamic Agriculture**

One woman biodynamic farmer grew up as a fourth generation of conventional farmers, however, she became disillusioned after learning about the negative impacts of it when she was younger. Although she pursued a different path growing up, certain circumstances led her to do an internship at a Camphill organization, and then her experience ultimately convinced her to do biodynamic farming for the community.

- **Evolving Practice Inspired by Nature**

Finally, one respondent answered that her work as a pharmacist and as a biodynamic farmer helps her to work not against nature but instead with nature in a creative and evolving way, case in point, growing healing plants as part of their farm activities which enables her to produce new products as a pharmacist.

Realities and Challenges of Agriculture from the Perspective of Women Biodynamic Farmers

- **Gender Dynamics and Collaborative Efforts**

According to two respondents, there is a balance when it comes to men and women in maintaining a farm, it is all collaborative effort while supporting each other. The men do the hard, physical activities on the farm, while the women work on finer activities, such as seeding, collecting herbs, organizing the marketing aspects of the farm, and more. Specifically, according to one of the respondents,

“Fortunately, my husband supports me and in this way I manage to develop myself as a BD woman, to work together on a wonderful task; to contribute to a bit of balance and light in our family/neighborhood/district/world.”

In addition, one respondent shared a poignant activity that she does with her husband, saying,

“[I] still sing with my beloved husband and we still go forward”.

- **Social Support and Community Integration**

For one respondent, one positive reality in biodynamic agriculture is the presence of a sense of community among farmers. This is related to what another biodynamic farmer answered, saying that in the Netherlands, although it faces some challenges, there exists social support for young women biodynamic farmers to rely on. Moreover, according to one young woman biodynamic

farmer, she feels appreciated for what she contributes to the farm, and that motivates her in doing her day-to-day activities.

- **Multifaceted Roles and Empowerment**

Women play a lot of roles in the field of agriculture, may it be in conventional or biodynamic farms. According to one respondent, she can serve as the rock on which her team can rely for support, also because of the inherent nurturing, intuitive, and sensitive nature of women in general. In addition, she added that even when women are not as physically strong as men, women have so much to offer, both in labor and leadership roles.

- **Educational and Knowledge Dissemination Challenges**

On the other hand, according to one respondent, as a biodynamic farmer in general, she finds it difficult to connect to people who have the will to share the knowledge of biodynamic agriculture. In addition, it is also difficult to disseminate the special significance of biodynamic farming to farmers in her country who might be interested but don't have the education to understand the concept better.

- **Feminization of Agriculture and Economic Viability**

Another main challenge that the respondents tackle in their responses is the feminization of agriculture. According to one respondent, because of declining income in agriculture, there is a gradual increase of men working in agriculture, and women have to continue their production activities in the home and participate in agricultural production outside the home, all the while taking care of the house and the family. This is supported by a response from another respondent, saying that generally in agriculture, women have the double burden of working on the farm and the household, while in Ecuador, there are no incentives for women biodynamic farmers.

Ways of Going Forward from the Perspective of Women Biodynamic Farmers

- **Empowerment Through Education and Training**

As the heart of agriculture, one respondent said that capacitating women farmers is crucial. Another respondent stressed the idea of having more entrepreneurship opportunities for women farmers. Of course, there have been countless projects to address it but continuing and making sure that it sustains is necessary. In addition, not only for women, infographics and other mediums as sources of information may contribute to encouraging farmers to start practicing biodynamic

farming. Social media has reached the corners of the world today and we might as well use it for the better, in this case, for example.

- **Social and Community Support Systems**

A healthy social structure in a farm is crucial to its success. According to one respondent, the healthier the social structure on a farm is, the more successful, whole, and healthier a farm can get. She also explained further,

"I think every biodynamic farm needs to have a broader social life, in order to fulfill all tasks and challenges. If that doesn't come within a family, it needs to have volunteers or supported programs from the government to be able to get much-needed help, I can't imagine real farms with animals and fields without male workers. [...] A healthy and not one-sided social structure of the farm is the most important thing for a biodynamic farm."

- **Incentives for Personal and Professional Growth**

This is different from all other responses, but according to one respondent, she believes women farmers need space to cultivate their individual development. That is why, according to her, women farmers, especially those who are working on farms that they do not own, should have the right to 3 weeks of holidays per year with financial support.

- **Sustainable Farm Management Practices**

According to one respondent, there is a need for her to change herself. As someone involved in biodynamic agriculture, she wants to learn from successful biodynamic farmers, especially when it comes to management. She is open to the idea of finding a unique and new management method that will benefit their farm, with a system for continuous advice from the experts.

- **Carrying the Threefold Nature of Farms**

Finally, one respondent contributed that farmers must make sure that their farms should observe the threefold nature of social life at all times and not allow the farm to become a commodity instead. According to her, they continuously work on this by growing their seeds and looking for partners to work with them on the farm and help carry the farm into the future.

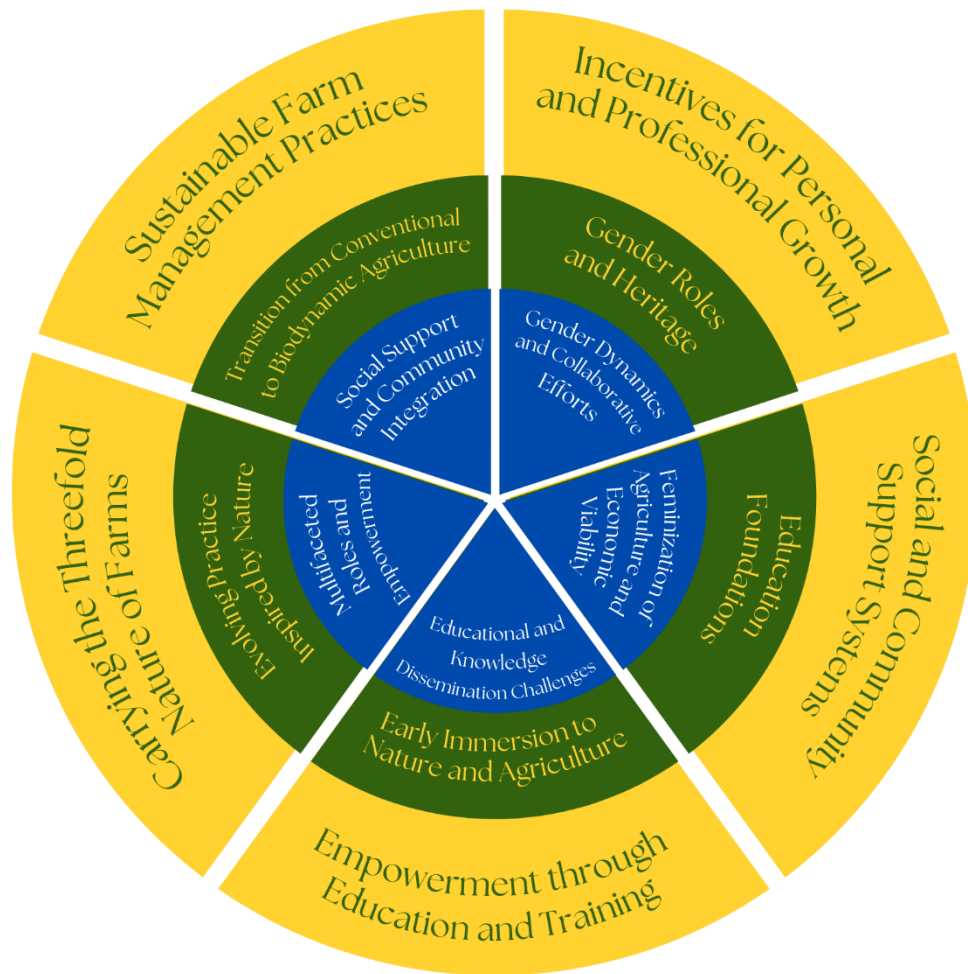


Figure 3. Results of the thematic analysis of the study.

Conclusion and Recommendation

To conclude the study on the perspectives of women biodynamic farmers on the current realities and challenges in agriculture, the researcher looked for two main overarching gestures from their responses and the themes that came out during the analysis.

One gesture is hopefulness. Based on the interviews, the respondents are still hopeful to see positive changes for women in agriculture, hopeful for the future of biodynamic agriculture, towards another 100 years from this year's 100 years of Steiner's Agricultural Course, and hopeful for the future of agriculture in general.

Another gesture that the researcher connected with the respondents of the study is belongingness. Like any organism, a biodynamic farm is an integrated system with a shared constitution for each farm member. Every member all each have their roles to uphold, men and women. With this, the community is activated and a healthy social structure is achieved.

Finally, the researcher noted certain differences in responses according to the country where they are when it comes to realities in agriculture. This can be attributed to the differing opportunities that each countries have for their agricultural industry, but in the future, there might be case studies focused on biodynamic farmers around the world – highlighting their inspirations and aspirations as a steward of their farms.

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