

WORK AND GENDER

The Sexual Division of Labour and Farmers' Attitudes to Labour in Central Norway, 1920–1980

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During the last hundred years, the original low technology agriculture of rural Norway has developed into highly specialized commercial farming. This transformation has been vividly discussed both by historians and ethnologists. A main theme in the debate has been as to which degree new technology and integration of agriculture in market economy have brought about a dissolution of the traditional peasant culture. In the present study of women's work on farms in Central Norway, it is argued that although the material structures of the farms have been subject to important transformations, essential structures such as the sexual division of labour and the ideas constituting the peasant ideal of femininity, hardly changed before the 1960s.

Keywords: women's work, gender, agricultural work, peasant culture, Central Norway

Introduction

The sexual division of labour and peasant society's attitudes to labour discussed in this article¹ are part of a more extensive study of the socialization and the adult life of women on farms in a small community (5,000 inhabitants) in central Norway. The two themes, socialization and adult life, are followed through three generations of women during the period 1920–1980. The analysis is an attempt to evaluate the register of the socialization of girls and of female adult life in relation to the economic and social organization of the farm on one hand, and on the other hand, in relation to traditional attitudes and values in a peasant culture as opposed to the ideologies reigning in the surrounding society.

The aspects of change and continuity in the sexual division of labour are discussed. Special attention is paid to women's work, both farm work and house-keeping including care of the various members of the household, and the relation between technological innovation and division of labour. The second part of the paper deals with the attitudes to labour typically found in the peasant society. These specific attitudes are here labelled "the mentality of work". During the period of study, this mentality of work was challenged by new ideologies of femininity. Of special interest is the part of the femininity ideology concerning motherhood.

Theoretical Frame-Work

In ethnology, folk culture is studied in the light of three central dimensions: time, space and social stratum. In other words, the ethnologist performs a cultural analysis from a historical perspective. When this discipline was still young, much emphasis was laid on the study of the traditional folk culture, that is the peasant culture. Today the whole spectrum of popular manifestations is part of the ethnologist's field of interest, although contemporary Norwegian ethnology mainly deals with work process studies.

In recent years, however, Norwegian ethnology has taken a new direction of study. The study of material cultural elements has been partially abolished and more emphasis has been put upon the study of so-called cognitive structures of culture.² These are the values and attitudes that form the basis of human behaviour. The present analysis of the cognitive structures is based on the bipartition of these structures introduced by the French Annales-school. Thus, an attempt is made to distinguish between the immaterial cultural manifestations whose origin may be attributed to an ideology and those with an origin in a specific mentality. Ideology is conceived as thought and idea systems elaborated by a certain period's intelligentsia and has been rooted in the literary tradition. Mentality is connected to a culture's system of standards and values. Mentality is transferred unconsidered and "unconsciously" and is often connected to a praxis which is considered correct and "natural" by the members of the community. According to the French Annales-tradition, mentality is the part of culture that changes the slowest (Blom 1986; Le Goff & Nora 1985). Ideology may prove to have such an impact that in time it will become a part of the mentality (Rosenbeck 1985). An illustrative example is the Victorian conception of femininity in which culturally founded female characteristics were considered to be of natural origin. Since then, Western women have been oppressed by a myth proclaiming that the women's body and mind primarily are intended for the reproductive or generative purpose (Hausen 1981: 56).

Applying the theoretical categories of ideology and mentality on the empirical material, the eth-

nologist may be able to show whether the immaterial innovations in the adult lives of women on farms give rise to opposition, or if they are accepted and assimilated by these women.

The Traditional Norwegian Peasant Culture: Some Characteristics

Traditional Norwegian peasant culture prior to today's specialized, commercial farming (that is before 1860) is little known outside Scandinavia, so in the following paragraphs a brief description intended to serve as back-ground information for the further presentation of my case-study will be given.

Traditionally, the division of labour between men and women in peasant society was very clear-cut and stable, although we find important, local variations concerning the contents of the female work tasks as opposed to the male ones. These variations may find their explanations in peasant economy, which was – and still is – based on the exploitation of different resources dependent on the geographical location of a community. Thus, farming is combined with fishing in the coastal districts and with forestry in the inlands. In this century, a new combination, that of farming and wage labour, has arisen.

Different combinations of economic adaptations have influenced the sexual division of labour as well as the organization of the peasant household and the distribution of authority between husband and wife. Ethnologists distinguish between areas with female peasants and areas with male peasants (Berggreen 1984). Female peasants have predominated in areas where the men left the farms for long periods, for example for fishing or woodcutting. Women with periodically absent husbands had more influence on the management of the farm than their fellow sisters in areas where the men worked on the farm most of the year. The majority of female peasants were found in regions where farms are relatively small, or where arable land is scarce, while male peasants often were found in regions where farms are big and arable land is abundant.

Norwegian agriculture is also characterized by the systematic utilization of vast mountain pastures, that is mountain dairy pasturing (Norwegian:

seterbruk). With some very few exceptions, mountain dairy farming is extinct today. Another characteristic feature of Norwegian agriculture is the isolated farms or small hamlets of single farms (*grend*), as opposed to European village organization.

The alpine cottage (*setra*) was a female domain. An adult woman, sometimes the housewife, was in charge of the dairy work, while a child was herding the animals. This could be a girl or a boy of eight to fifteen years. The dairy products constituted an essential part of the winter food supply and were extremely important for the household. In addition, cheese and butter are some of the few articles that were produced for sale.

The traditional division of labour between men and women on the farm mainly corresponds to the division between outdoor work (*utearbeid*) and indoor work (*innarbeid*), respectively. In other words, men worked outdoors and women worked indoors. The cowshed, the pigsty and the hencoop belonged to the female sphere of work. The horse was the only animal taken care of by the husband himself or by a male servant. It is important to emphasize that women also carried out fieldwork.

This rigid sexual division of labour was manifest in fieldwork too. As a rule, women never ploughed or sowed in regions where male farming predominated. However, they did heavy work like picking stones from the fields and cutting cereals. Men never participated in the indoor work.

Sexual Division of Labour ca. 1920–1960³

Even up to the period between the two wars, the children growing up in peasant households were socialized into a division of labour that closely resembled the traditional one known from regions with male peasants. The farmer himself was the head of fieldwork, while the wife and the children were assistants doing the nontechnical work. The cutting of cereals was female work as long as it was carried out by hand, but when cutting machines were introduced, it passed to the male domain. Already in the beginning of the twentieth century, mountain dairy farming had been abandoned. Thus in the period under observation, dairy production and produc-

tion of refined milk products had been taken over by proper dairies. Therefore, women no longer had the dairy farm as their domain. The new system implied that the milk was delivered to the dairy, but it also required that the women had to pay more attention to the quality of the milk. As the production of milk grew more important in the total economy of the farm, the work in the cowshed increased, in spite of the fact that the refining of the milk was done in the dairies.⁴ The change from mountain dairy farming to dairy industry is an important trait of the first technological transformation of agriculture.

During the first half of this century, the number of farm workers⁵ employed in agriculture decreased, and in the 1950s, many married couples were alone with their daily work on the farm. Seasonal labour, however, was still hired to do fieldwork. Today, the number of farm workers in Norwegian agriculture is almost non-existent. The second technological transformation of agriculture started in the 1940s with the introduction of new agricultural machinery, the tractor being the most important new piece of farming equipment. The technological household revolution did not take place until the 1960s.⁶ Therefore, in the period 1940–1960, approximately, we observe an unbalance in the burden of labour between the two sexes, in the disfavour of the women.

Rigidity or Flexibility in the Sexual Division of Labour? Superiority and Inferiority

The farm traditionally was a unity with a rigid division of labour between the sexes. Both men and women were expected to master certain skills by virtue of their gender. There are, however, numerous examples of a crossing of the borderline between male and female work, especially in relation to fieldwork. The borderline between the two sexes' fields of activity becomes somewhat less distinct when we follow the children in their tasks. Small boys were doing textile work like carding, and they also assisted their mother in the cowshed doing the cleaning and feeding, but rarely the milking. In households with only girls, the daughters accompanied their father in the traditional male fieldwork. But children growing up in households with both girls and boys

were socialized into the adult division of labour from an early age. The girls followed their mother in their work, and the boys had the father as their teacher. So the girls, among other tasks, did housework as a favour to their brothers.

As we have seen, the division of work was rigid. On the other hand, it was also characterized by the flexibility displayed by one sex. The women had to subordinate themselves to the leadership of the farmer whenever the labour in the fields required more hands. This flexibility manifested itself through the women's praxis of postponing parts of the housekeeping during the labour intensive summer season. In my opinion, this feature justifies that an interpretation of the relationship between the sexes be held in terms of patriarchy. This patriarchy interpretation is sustained by the fact that the majority of women who married a farmer in the years between the wars and in the 1950s were denied any information of or influence upon the management of the farm. The higher prestige of the male work can also be seen from the way the crossing of the borderlines in the sexual division of labour was sanctioned: A woman who mastered a man's work was held in esteem but at the same time the label "mannishness" was attached to her person while a man was considered ridiculous if he performed a woman's work.

The following quotation from an interview with a woman born in 1919, will illustrate the female subordination:

Interviewer: Do you think we have got more equality between husband and wife?

Interviewed: Yes, no doubt, and, you know, before my time, they were afraid of their husbands. They had to do things exactly as they knew they [the husbands] wanted it to be done.

[...] I know somebody, it might be from my parents' generation, where the wives left the cowshed to pour coffee for their husband. They left the cow they were milking! Because they had to see to it that the cup was not empty! It was not common, but I know it happened.

As late as the 1960s, one can distinguish between two

separate work hierarchies as a function of gender, the women's being subordinate to the men's. While growing up, girls had to obey the adult women in the household, mainly their mother. The superior authority, however, was held by the father. A majority of young wives worked together with their mother-in-law for some years, the latter being the head of the female hierarchy as long as the young wife's father-in-law remained in charge of the management of the farm. When the authority was transferred to his son, the young wife attained the peak of her female career as a farm woman. It was she who now was in charge of the female work on the farm, but she had no authority when it came to the management of the land, the forest or the means of production. Of course individual differences occurred: Some women were strong enough to claim their rights. Those who have succeeded in breaking the male dominance, are often female allodialists.⁷

The Milking Machine: An Example of both Change and Continuity in the Sexual Division of Labour

The story of the introduction of the milking machine is an example of how technological innovation may cause a break in the tradition, but it also illustrates how an innovation may contribute to sustaining the traditional division of labour. Finally, the introduction of the milking machine is also an example of a correspondence between the introduction of a piece of new technology and of men taking over female work. The milking machine, and together with the machine, the man, entered the cowshed in the 1940s and 1950s.

Until then, the cowshed and all the work connected with the care of the animals' feeding, watering, cleaning and milking was female work. To become an efficient hand milker, one must be trained from an early age. An untrained person is not able to do this kind of work. As time goes by, this heavy work puts a strong stress on arms and hands, and aged women are often troubled with pains in their arms because of the hand-milking they have been doing for years and from the age of approximately eleven.

The refining of milk was taken over by dairies

already in the beginning of this century. This is an indication of the increased economic importance of animal husbandry. In spite of this it is a fact that the women went on to do the tedious milking.⁸ Why was it so? Did the men acquire an interest in the cowshed and the production of milk for the mere reason that with modern technology the work could be done quicker and easier?

The story concerning why their husband bought a milking machine is remembered by all the informants who have experienced the transition from hand milking to mechanical milking. Very often this is the story about the wife who falls ill and remains incapable of doing the work in the cowshed for some time. Her husband tries for a short while to do the job, but being untrained with the milking, he fares poorly. The story ends with the purchase of the machine.

The women who are telling the story do not attribute any importance to the fact that in this way their husbands took over some of the work that earlier belonged to them. Rather they stress the point that generally, men never accepted doing female work in the cowshed as long as this work was manual. The second point which throws light on the agrarian patriarchy, is this: Many women express clearly that this is one of few examples of their husbands being willing to spend money on something that would reduce the women's burden of labour. The reason the women give for this, is, that in actual fact their husbands bought the machines because of their own needs.

But why did the men not simply hand over the milking machine to the women the way they later handed over the washing machine, for instance? Why did the men increase their actual field of work, and why did the women consent to having their field of work restricted? I have no full explanation of this so far, but some reasons will be suggested in the following paragraphs:

1. The female labour was still heavy and exhausting as most of the work was done by hand. Both men and women agree that the women had the longest working day at this time.
2. In the beginning of the twentieth century, milk-

ing and the rest of the work in the cowshed had been the job of the maid. On smaller farms, however, this work was done by the housewife or one of her daughters. As the number of servants decreased, this work in the cowshed had to be done by the housewife or her daughters. At this time, the indoor work was attributed a higher prestige than the milking. The former and the present paragraph lead to the conclusion that nothing in the women's total situation gave any reason for the women to regret this loss of female domain.

3. The milking machine came into common use at a time when the amount of male work on the farm was reduced as a result of the increased use of machines in the fields. The men suddenly had more time on their hands.

How and where should they invest their spare time? At the farm, there were two places to go: either to the cowshed, or to the dwelling house. Here we must take the traditional border line between male and female work into consideration: The man could not pass the threshold to do indoor work without losing face. The traditional rigid sexual division of labour with a transition being possible only to the female labour force, has until today served as a mental block against male participation in housekeeping. The cowshed, however, was a zone of transition, even if it traditionally belonged to the female field of activity. It has been pointed out earlier that small boys could do assistant work in the cowshed. And, what is more important, in the last three decades, milk production became of increasing economic importance to the farm and consequently of increasing interest to the farmer himself. In conclusion, the farmer had only one place to go, namely to the cowshed.

Today husband and wife share the care for the animals and the milking at the farms that still have animal husbandry.⁹ These women are less peripheral in the farm production than their fellow sisters on farms producing only grain or grass.

Attitudes to Labour

The attitudes to labour will here be regarded as a cultural mechanism that, together with the basic need

for food and clothes, kept the peasant family at their work. Finally an attempt will be undertaken to show how farm women in the actual period were torn between work and care.

During the last twenty years, farming in Norway has developed into a profession among other professions. However, farming is still a life-mode that regulates and influences not only the work, but also the private life of the farm household (Højrup 1983). Agriculture differs from other life-modes in the modern society in that the household is still a unity of work and not only of consumption. Farmers are the only social group in modern Norway that leads a daily life where work and leisure time are still firmly entwined. The farm work must be done, and even if the farmer couple tries to restrict the daily number of working hours, the changing character of the work with highly intensive labour periods during summer in contrast to the more quiet wintertime, makes it difficult to calculate the work in a regular number of hours per day.

In spite of the increasing demands for efficiency and profit today, the women who have been interviewed as a general rule state that they consider themselves satisfied with the peasant way of life. They regard themselves and their husbands as people who are free to work as they like. Nobody tells them what to do, nor when to do it. As they put it, they are "their own masters". On the other hand, there is little choice, since "the farm is our living".

And the work, ... there is one very important thing, and that is to run the farm properly, to keep it well, and to work hard! That is the nicest thing you can say about a person in the countryside. I think this is specific to the country life. That one is industrious and runs the farm well, and that one is enterprising, so to say. I think they bother less about other personal qualities. That is my point of view. (Woman born in 1956)

This quotation from an interview with a young wife on a farm illustrates a central feature of the mentality in peasant society, that is, the strong importance attributed to work, work being the paramount con-

stituent of life, and the most outstanding human virtues being those of industry and enterprise.

To be a farmer, male or female, is to accept labour as a fundamental condition of life. To many farmers, life is equivalent to work, and vice versa. This profound acceptance of life being equivalent to hard work should be seen in connection with the family's economic strategy. The objective of the project for the future of a young peasant couple "is aimed at creating alliances which ensure accession to ownership of the land, or its development, or yet again to prevent its being broken up" (Segalen 1983: 13). In this strategy, the preservation and the improvement of the farm are paramount, marriage and childbirths being instruments to fulfil the project for the future. The attitudes to labour in the peasant life-mode may be considered components of a "key scenario". The key scenarios of a culture "both formulate appropriate goals and suggest effective action for achieving them, [...] in other words (they are) key cultural strategies" (Ortner 1973: 1341). The attitudes to labour in the present paper labelled "the mentality of work" form part of the cognitive structures of peasant culture.

Contemporary and historical feminist research in Scandinavia parts from a definition of women's work that includes both wage labour, housework and care (Gullestad 1984; Holter 1984). To modern women, the main division in the organization of their daily life is between wage labour and family work, and not between work and leisure time. The conflict between wage labour and family work that many women experience today is well known. Until the last war, female wage labour was more or less restricted to working class women; as wage labour has become common also among middle class women, this conflict is now being paid more attention. The situation of farm women is often forgotten in the debate because their double work is less obvious, and because it is rooted in a different economic organization.

Married women on farms have carried out "institutionalized double work" (Gaunt 1983) insofar as farm work, housework and care have been woven together for centuries. They acquire their profession

by marriage, in contrast to other people who normally choose their profession.¹⁰ This must be one of the reasons why so many of the informants define themselves as housewives, although they admit that the work they carry out during a day in many aspects differs from that of a housewife in town. They clearly do not fit into the official categories of profession.

The Farm Women Trapped between Work and Care

We had a sleeping room and nothing else in the dwelling house. That was all, this was perhaps the worst period. [...] When I think about it now... that even if it did not last for more than five years, I consider it a long time. [...] And you never knew if you did enough. I remember I was out in the field cutting grain. I remember that my mother-in-law carried the baby to me in the field so that he could be nursed. [...] I married in 1948, in April, and after that things happened in rapid succession. The following year in July, that is fourteen months later, I got number two. And it was a difficult time. One sort of had no change to care for oneself or the children. For if one had a couple of hours free, one nevertheless felt that one had to work. In the busy period (summer), I worked in the fields, and my mother-in-law did the cooking. [...] And the children stayed with her. Do you know what was dreadful for me? That was when I came home, and they ran towards me, so that I had to carry them. But being so tired, I nearly fell myself. And they came to us and were happy, you know, because we came home. This was very difficult for me. (Woman born in 1923)

Interviewer: What did you do when you had small children, did she [the mother-in-law] look after the children while you were out working in the fields, or were you free from doing part of the field work while you had small children?

Interviewed: No, she preferred not to work outdoors. And I wanted to stay outdoors because I've always liked to work in the open. And the youngest ones stayed with her, but when they grew a bit older, then I brought them with me out into the

fields, you know. So after all one has a bit of bad conscience. [...] Today they say their conscience is bad because they take wage labour having small children, but the bad conscience, a farmer's wife had that too, because one was always extremely busy. One had little time for the care of the children. Very little time. Well, and I have told them now after they are grown up, that after all I have a bad conscience, because I never had the time to accompany them anywhere. Or work had to be done in the cowshed, or it was ... there was always something. (Woman born in 1921)

The two quotations illustrate the abovementioned conflict, a conflict that is experienced by many of the interviewed women. They were trapped between the peasant society's expectations of them to be industrious workers, and their own wish for being caregiving mothers. An obvious interpretation of what the women state themselves, is that the general demand on the peasant women to fulfil the ideal of work traditionally has been stronger than the expectations laid upon the woman to care for the emotional needs of the family. At least, the first has been given priority to the second.

The conflict may also be viewed as the emergence of new ideas about mothering and housework among farm women in this period, ideas originally rooted in the dominant culture's ideas and values.¹¹ In the years between the world wars it became common that girls in the countryside followed courses in housekeeping and infant nursing. In elementary school, at these courses in housekeeping and also in the popular literature, the young girls became acquainted with the bourgeois ideal of femininity. This ideal, however, emanated from a sexual division of labour which was totally unknown to the majority within peasant society until the 1960s and the late modernisation of agriculture. Although the bourgeois female type was held up as an ideal also for peasant women, my assertion is that this female ideal prescribing the woman exclusively to care for the management of the house and the family life, never had a breakthrough. The daily need for labour on the farm, and the "mentality of work", were an ef-

ficient hindrance to an ideal of femininity prescribing refinement and fragility. As in French peasant culture as described by Martine Segalen (Segalen 1983: 17), the ideal of femininity among Norwegian peasants was one of laborious women of physical vigour and health.

This was a period of shifting ideas, and many mothers seem to have been torn between the loyalty to the farm that was the living of the family, and the ideal of a modern and sentimental mother, putting more effort into the emotional care of the children than what had been usual in the traditional peasant society. Given the material structures and the division of labour within the family, the women had no objective possibilities to introduce a sentimental praxis.¹²

The new technology, like the milking machine and the household technology of the 1960s, saved time that could be used to care for the family. After 1960, however, we are confronted with a third ideal of femininity which must be understood in the light of postwar education society rather than in terms of the eighteenth century bourgeois female ideal.

Notes

- 1 Presented as a paper at the XIIIth Rural Sociology Conference, Braga 1–4 April, 1986.
For an extensive discussion of the sexual division of labour and the importance of work related to age and generations in this farming community, see Thorsen 1993: 51–183 and 193–219.
- 2 Today, thirty years after this article was written, studies of material culture, or materiality, have been proliferating in ethnology and related disciplines as well as in the social sciences.
- 3 The following discussion of the sexual division of labour and farmers' attitudes to labour is based on oral sources, that is, qualitative interviews with 45 farm women born between 1900 and 1956. The transcriptions of the interviews are 1,700 pages.
- 4 Avdem (1984) in her study of peasant women's labour in the mountain settlement of Lesja in central Norway, explains thoroughly how women's work concerning the care for the cows and the responsibility of the production of milk, led to an increase in their labour.
- 5 A farm worker as opposed to a seasonal labourer was employed for a year at a time.
- 6 The washing machine was the most important technological innovation in the female indoor work. The washing machine had become a common good as late as the 1960s. The freezer put an end to the laborious conservation of food. Many households bought both a washing machine and a freezer within a couple of years of each other.
- 7 In Norway, the eldest son has had the first right to take over the farm (allodial right). In 1975, a new law assigned the allodial right to the firstborn child irrespective of gender. In a paper presented at this conference, Eldbjørg Fossgard studies the strong opposition to the new allodial law in peasant society.
- 8 In other West-European countries, like England and Denmark, male specialists took over the work in the cowshed, including milking, in the same period as the dairy products increased in value. In England, milking was male work as early as in the middle of the nineteenth century, in Denmark a couple of decades later.
- 9 The number of farms in the community with a production based on animal husbandry decreases every year. Those who continue are usually situated in areas not fit for the production of grain in combination with the breeding of pigs.
- 10 Of course, this choice of profession is limited by factors like family tradition, economy, social class etc.
- 11 For an introduction to the complex discussion of the ideological change of the conception of the private life, including mothering and family life, refer to Ariès (1963), Frykman (1981), Frykman & Löfgren (1979), Shorter (1976), among others.
- 12 Sentimental is here given the same meaning as in Shorter (1976).

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Author's Note to the Reprinted Article

In this reprinted version of the article, I refer to the book based on my dr. philos thesis, *Det fleksible kjønn*, instead of, as in the original version, articles. In the book persons, farms and community are anonymous; I have therefore also omitted names in the reprinted article.

In Norwegian, *bonde* and *bondekvinne* mean both “peasant” and “peasant woman”. The use of these terms was not consistent in the original version. I have replaced “peasant woman” with “farm woman”, but kept the translation of *bondesamfunn* and *bondekultur* as “peasant society” and “peasant culture”.

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