Feeling Seen and Building Community

The Role of Networks Among Women Farmers in Sweden

Charlotta Berner

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Abstract

Networks for women is a recurring initiative in multiple industries, a space where they can share knowledge, questions and experiences in a safe environment. Women farmers work in an agricultural industry in Sweden that is male dominated, both from a cultural and a numerical standpoint. The male farmer is an identity that has traditionally been allowed to shape and define the industry. In Sweden there has been a decline in both the number of farms and the number of farmers, which has resulted in fewer local peers to share experiences and insights with. Research also shows that there is an emerging issue of depression and thoughts of suicide among farmers.

In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six women farmers that live and work in Sweden. They were all members of women-only networks for farmers, either online or physical. The aim was to investigate how networking with other women benefits women farmers, and how it supports them as well as what kinds of networks exist and what themes are highlighted. The theoretical framework used to discuss the findings were resilience theory in combination with gender, women and networking, and users and gratification.

Six main networks were identified, two physical and four online. Most of these are emergent networks, created by individuals responding to specific needs such as legal advice, succession planning, or opportunities for collaboration. The one prescribed network, initiated by the European Union, has evolved into a more collaborative and self-driven community. The networks that this thesis studies are mainly a combination of social, professional and informal. For some, women-only networks are a strategic response to structural inequality. For others, they are more about personal connection and shared life rhythms. But in all cases, they reflect a gendered negotiation of space, power, and survival, highlighting how networking platforms can be tools of both resilience and resistance. Networking can serve as a valuable alternative to traditional face-to-face counselling, helping to make mental health services more accessible to those in rural farming communities. This study also shows that networks have played a vital role for women farmers who are currently in, or have previously experienced, abusive relationships. While the women in this study acknowledge that the networks are valuable and necessary in many respects, they also point out areas for improvement, particularly the need for more personal interactions.

Keywords: Networking, Women-only networks, Gender, Women farmers, Interviews, Resilience.

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1. Introduction

In Sweden you can find a lot of different networks about agriculture specifically made by women, for women, both online and in real life. The Swedish Board of Agriculture (SBA for short, 2020 p.17) points out that many networks for women have emerged out of the #metoo movement in 2017. Networks for women is a recurring initiative in multiple industries, a space where they can share knowledge, questions and experience in a safe environment. For many women this creates a mentorship and sisterhood where they can facilitate and support each other (SBA 2020 p.17). A lot of those groups have thousands of members with multiple posts a day.

Women farmers work in an agricultural industry in Sweden that is male dominated, both from a cultural and a numerical standpoint (SBA 2020 p.2). Gender segregation is upheld by the existence of a male norm that contributes to creating a power structure where women are seen as a minority deviating from the norm. The most profitable and productive parts of agriculture are coded as male, such as for example ownership, which maintains the hierarchy. The male farmer is an identity that has traditionally been allowed to shape and define the industry. This has contributed to a homosocial culture that prevents women and young workers from choosing a career in agriculture (SBA 2020 p.2).

The possibilities for collaboration and communication between farmers changes if there are less farms with a larger distance between them. Research done by Mehrabi (2023 p.951) shows that the number of farms globally will shrink in half from 616 million, but the size of the average existence farm could double by the end of the 21st century.

In Sweden there has been a decline in both the number of farms and the number of farmers (SBA 2024). This has led to the remaining farmers having fewer colleagues nearby. In the last decade there has been a reduction of 16% in the number of agricultural enterprises in Sweden (from 67 176 in 2013 to 56 171 in 2023). 158,300 people worked at least 100 hours in agriculture in 2023. This is a decrease of 8,100 people since 2020. Of those employed, 90,000 were men and 68,000 were women. Just over two out of five people employed in agriculture were women in 2023 (SBA 2024).

As the number of farmers declines, there are fewer local peers to share experiences and insights with. Farmers can often rely on networks for advice, troubleshooting, and sharing best practices (Adamaagashi et al 2023 p.59-60). Adamaagashi et al (2023 p.59-60) point out how farmer networks in their study in

Africa rely on the idea that farmers learn most effectively from their peers who deal with similar challenges and have local knowledge and context-related strategies for handling them. A smaller community of farmers could mean fewer opportunities for such exchanges, leading to a loss of vital support.

In addition to this, climate change is affecting the agricultural sphere, and the concept of resilience is therefore an important aspect to highlight. Factors such as gender, age, class, and other aspects of identity significantly shape how individuals experience and are affected by events like extreme weather, drought or crop failure (Smyth and Sweetman 2015 p.409-412). It is therefore essential to acknowledge that girls and women often are disproportionately affected by disasters and the changing climate.

Relatively few studies in the Global North have specifically focused on the health and well-being experiences of women farmers (Wheeler and Nye 2024 p.132-133). There is a need to gain insight into women farmers experiences, especially from a perspective of networking and resilience. Social media has also made it possible to create networks and communicate even though there are large geographic distances between farmers.

To address this limited scholarship around farmers' use of networks, especially on social media, this thesis examines this gap through interviews with women farmers in Sweden who are members of women's only networks. It focuses on networks both online and in real life, such as for example Facebook groups or local groups who meet up once a month. The thesis begins with highlighting its purpose and research questions, then it explores relevant literature on farmers and networks for women in both the world and Sweden. The theoretical framework will then be discussed along with the method. Finally, the findings from this study are presented and analysed, and suggestions for further research will be brought forth.

2. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to contribute to an increased understanding of women farmers' experiences of networks for women in agriculture. The aim is to investigate how networking with other women benefits women farmers, and how it can support them as well as what kinds of networks exist and what themes are highlighted. By understanding and discussing how these networks are used, policymakers and development practitioners can identify and create strategies to improve their role in supporting women farmers.

In particular, this study explores the following research questions:

What kind of networks for women farmers exist and what is discussed within them?

According to women farmers, why are networks for women in agriculture needed?

In what ways can the networks support the participating women?

3. Background

3.1 Mental health and farmers

The impact of stress on the mental health of farmers is a growing concern (Bjornestad et al 2019 p.109). In addition to physical stressors, farm related work, interpersonal worries and external factors increase the vulnerability of farmers to mental health issues. This includes long days, farm administration, heavy workload, isolation and business management as well as government regulation, climate change and family conflict.

A study done by Bjornestad et al (2019 p.109) shows that 8,7% of the American farmers reported mild, moderate or severe depression symptoms. 13,3% reported feeling that life was not worth living at some point. The importance of social support from family and friends in the prevention of depressive symptoms in farmers are shown by the researchers. They accentuate how networking may be an alternative to face-to-face counselling to ensure that mental health services reach rural farmers. Future farmers may also need more social support as suicide rates in the agricultural industry are among the highest rates by occupation in the US (Mehrabi (2023 p.950-952).

The role of social support in emerging depressing symptoms among farmers is underscored by Bjornestad et al (2019 p.109-101), who says that interventions aimed at expanding social support could be beneficial for mental health. The authors point out relational coping aligns with the protective role of social support networks, where community connections and coping diversity offer resilience against suicidal tendencies and stress among first generation farmers, and aligns with the importance of social support networks.

A limited number of studies in the global north give focused attention to women farmers' experiences of health and wellbeing, regardless of existing knowledge about gender-based violence, gender inequality as well as women's fear of crime, particularly in rural areas (Wheeler and Nye 2024 p.132-133). Although myriad studies have been performed to investigate interventions, impact, causation and outcomes among farming populations few of them have focused on women's experiences. They also emphasize how most of the research has been conducted in the US and therefore there is a need for a wider geographical perspective. The need for a wider perspective and a focus on women farmers experiences are also argued for by Brian Kuns (2021 p.46) that point out how studies with a focus on gender are occurring under unequal conditions. He stresses that research focusing on sustainability in Swedish agriculture often

prioritizes environmental concerns. Meanwhile social dimensions such as gender equality are downplayed.

3.2 A Swedish focus

The future generation of farmers is a group that has been relatively neglected in previous research according to Grubbström et al (2014 p.152-153). Through the lens of resilience theory that focuses on adaptation and renewal, they interview Swedish agricultural students in focus groups. Based on those interviews they highlight how networking is a prominent feature and that the "solitary farmer" is not present in the students' discussions. New thinking and renewal form an important strategy for the students facing generational succession. It is valuable to have good cooperation with the neighbours. The challenge that they face needs "good" communication profitability as well as social ties and a functioning work balance.

Now, when fewer farm daughters and sons are projected to inherit and take over the family farm, there is increasing policy and academic interest in new entrants and the challenges they meet when they start their farm (Grubbström and Joosse 2021 p.23-24). It is not just the weather and price falls that can give potential disaster for the farming business. A worst-case scenario could be that the farmer's relationship crashes, or that the untenable workload leads to health problems that eventually put an end to the ability to work. Additionally, Grubbström and Joosse´s (2021 p.23-24) study highlights the importance of supporting farmers' networks, particularly as the distance between farms continues to grow. From a European Union perspective, this is especially crucial in more sparsely populated countries like Sweden. The study suggests that social media plays a key role in networking and sharing knowledge, and digital platforms may serve as essential resources for learning.

3.3 Social Media's role in knowledge exchange for farmers

Social media is a broad term encompassing different forms, but the most frequent are social networks like Instagram, Facebook, X (Twitter), LinkedIn, Snapchat and video sharing platforms such as Youtube (Phillips et al 2018 p.1-2). TikTok can also be viewed as a newly added addition. These Social media networks are new communication tools for rural communities and have made it possible for rural social networks to be created (Phillips et al 2018 p. 1-2). Research demonstrates that farmers utilize social media to exchange knowledge

that supports decision-making on their farms. Information that is not easily accessible is often discussed, questioned, and validated within online communities, potentially fostering rural innovation. Farmers who use both Facebook groups and Twitter have become skilled at engaging with social media, embracing the ideas of community (as a network) and collective knowledge.

There is a need to understand more about the roles that social media play in farmers' agricultural innovation as well as decision-making (Phillips et al 2018 p.2-3). Although there has been an increase in the amount of literature and studies on the general use of social media, not a lot of the focus has been on farmers and how they in particular are using the platforms.

3.4 A brief history of women's networking

In the early nineteen hundreds some professional women's networks and organisations were founded (Coleman 2010 p. 270-271). But some of the networks that currently exist were set up in the late 1980s and beginning of 1990s. Coleman (2010 p.270-271) points out the difficulties with making a too rigid historical timeline on the developments of networks, and especially women's networks. Even though a lot of current networks for women do not explicitly call themselves feminist, most of them were built and developed in connection with a change in culture following the second wave of feminism. The networks that exist vary in size and in levels of formality, and smaller networks usually rely on volunteers to plan meetings meanwhile larger networks usually have levels of formality with appointed or elected officials.

To a certain extent women only networks in the working environment have been built as a reaction to the perceived advantages that men are thought to derive from networking. Networks at work are usually identified with "old boys" networks which are always linked with male privileges according to Coleman (2010 p. 270-271). Women's networks tend to be regarded as less powerful simply because they are only for women. They might be made fun of as "mothers' meetings", which can lead to some women avoiding the networks because they presume they will benefit more from joining mainly male, and therefore more "powerful" groups (Coleman 2010 p. 270-271).

As previously mentioned in the introduction, a lot of the women's-only networks in Sweden were created when the #metoo movement happened in 2017 (SBA 2020 p.17)

3.5 The complexity of women's networks

There are diverse opinions regarding women's networks. Harrison et al (2024) spotlight in their research the complexity of opinions around women's only networks. They study women entrepreneurs and conclude that women-only formal entrepreneurship networks have a limited impact on helping these women overcome the isolation and individualizing effect of a gendered field. They argue that women-only formal networks only serve to perpetuate and reproduce the embedded masculinity of the entrepreneurship domain in the absence of fitting interventions. Harrison et al (2024 p.211-212) discuss and bring forth earlier research that criticizes women's business networks because while the individual in these groups may establish strategies that meet their needs, they fail to address structural and organisational inequalities.

Although Harrison et al (2024 p.211-212) also mention that networks, both formal and informal, have played an important role in generating social capital by making it possible to access knowledge, customers, investors as well as suppliers. Which enhances entrepreneurial self-efficiency and legitimacy.

An example of an organisation that does not encourage separating professional networks by gender is the Federation of Swedish Farmers (Phone call 13/5 2025). They argue that they do not have any networks exclusively for women farmers as they do not want to separate farmer networks by gender.

Changing people's attitudes and culture takes time and effort. It is a work that must be integrated into all work processes as it affects all work. Gender equality cannot be seen as an individual project. Therefore, relying solely on networks for women has been identified as a risk by the Swedish board of agriculture (2020 p. 17-18) as it can reduce gender equality work into a "women´s issue". Note that this study does not aim to suggest that women networks for women farmers are a sole solution for women farmers to overcome adversities or structural inequalities within the agricultural sphere. Rather it wants to examine what kind of networks exist in Sweden and how it can support women farmers. It is seen as a piece of a larger structural issue.

While previous research has identified different benefits and opinions to networks for women farmers, this study responds to a need for research that further understands the farmers perceptions of networks for women farmers, especially from a different geographical area than most research previously done.

4.   Theoretical Framework

In this section I will present and discuss the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse my material. First, I will introduce gender, then continue with gender and resilience, women's networking and users and gratification framework. Together, these theoretical lenses allow for a nuanced understanding of how the members within women's networks for farmers navigate the challenges posed by the geographic isolation, structural barriers and declining number of farms in the agricultural industry.

Note that this thesis does not aim to examine or discuss the term gender in the analysis on its own. Rather it will be discussed alongside resilience and networking. To be able to understand gender and resilience and women and networking as a framework, you first need to briefly understand the concept of gender. Therefore, I will present the term shortly underneath.

4.1   Gender as a term

One of the foundational researchers in gender theory is Judith Butler (1990 p.140-143) who challenges the idea that gender is tied to biological sex. She claims that gender is performative, meaning that it is something people do rather than something they inherently are born as. Gender identity is fluid and is therefore constructed through repeated behaviours in combination with societal expectations. Gender is seen as socially constructed, which assumes that society and our perceptions of the world are created in interaction with other people (Parsons et al 2018 p. 75-77). Researchers within the tradition argue that our perceptions of, for example, gender, ethnicity and society are the result of interactions with other people and the social environment we live in. Social constructivism opposes the idea that there is an objective truth/reality that exists outside our understanding of it (Parsons et al 2018 p. 75-77). Swedish researcher Gunilla Jarlbro (2006 p.12-13) also highlights how the gender categories of woman/man are social constructions, deeply influenced by media (including agricultural networks), and shaped by power dynamics within society.

4.2   Gender and Resilience

Smyth and Sweetman (2015 p.413) highlight how due to the unequal and distinct gendered roles and responsibilities that are put on women and men, vulnerability and risks to disasters have a gender dimension.

The core of the concept of resilience is the idea of strength in the face of adversity, according to Smyth and Sweetman (2015 p.406-408). Resilience-based approaches in humanitarian and development work aim to strengthen people's defences against future risks, not just to survive and recover from ongoing crises. It focuses on developing and boosting well-being, realising rights, and reducing risk through investing in activities, social relationships and resources. Although, they also argue that it is crucial to have an approach to resilience which emphasises uncovering and challenging unequal power relations. Gender, age, class and other aspects of identity affects the impact of for example extreme weather, crop disease or pandemics. With this in mind, it is essential to adopt approaches to resilience which challenge gender inequality and promote women's rights.

It is important to recognize that girls and women usually are disproportionate victims when disasters happen as well as highlighting their significant role as crisis managers, ensuring that needs of their communities and families are met. But, Smyth and Sweetman (2015 p.409-412) also point out the importance of the language of victimhood and vulnerability when addressing women in relation to resilience, as it can encourage negative stereotypes. Vulnerability is not a natural attribute of a woman but deeply rooted in gender inequality. Women as individuals are not passive or helpless, but they often find their ability to handle hardship affected by the social roles and power relations assigned to them in a particular context. Caring for family and the community in hardship and risk requires tremendous ingenuity and tenacity, which is usually unnoticed and unappreciated (Smyth and Sweetman 2015 p.409-412). Although paradoxically, those women are usually presumed to be inherently more vulnerable, and thus less resilient than men.

Berkes (2007 p.283), identify four factors for building resilience. This study will primarily focus on the fourth:

1) Learning to cope with change and uncertainty by, for example, maintaining tools essential for adaption, flexibility and new thinking.
2) Nurturing diversity to promote reorganisation and renewal. Diversity may provide better conditions for handling stress and reducing vulnerability.
3) Combining different types of knowledge when learning.
4) Creating opportunities for self-organisation, including collaborations and networks.

Being able to self-organize though networks can therefore be seen as an important aspect of resilience for women farmers, as this thesis will study and discuss. The reason women's networks were chosen is because women and young girls are usually disproportionate victims when disasters happen, therefore their perspective on how these networks can support them is important to consider.

4.3 Networking and women farmers

There are many different kinds of networks and many definitions of what encompasses as a network. Brass et al (2004 p.795) define networking as a process with "the coming together of similarly minded people for the purpose of contact, friendship, and support." They describe networks as a set of nodes and the set of ties representing some relationship, or lack of relationship, between the nodes. Where the nodes are actors (individual people, organisations etc). Usually when studying networks the focus is on strategic alliances and collaborations, flows of information (communications), affect and influence (Brass et al 2004 p.795-796). There are various types of networks, each differing in size and purpose, and they often serve different interests for individuals.

Social networks primarily serve a social function, providing a sense of relief with the thought, "I am not alone; there are others in the same situation" (Lann 1996 p. 16-18). These networks are often established early in life and consist of family, friends, and other acquaintances. They form a supportive group that individuals can turn to during challenging times.

Professional networks, in contrast, focus on work and career-related matters (Lann 1996 p.16-18). They consist of contacts that assist one another in solving business problems and addressing work-related challenges. Exchange of experience is a crucial aspect of professional networks. The more diverse the experiences within the network, the more it will grow and benefit its members.

Informal networks are composed of like-minded individuals who may meet occasionally to discuss various issues (Lann 1996 p. 16-18). They form outside formal organizational structures, built on shared interests, personal connections and trust.

Coleman (2010 s. 770) differentiates between *emergent* and *prescribed* networks where emergent networks were set up by an individual or a group of individuals in response to an identified need. An example would be if a group or individual woman farmers set up a network to share their experiences about

ownership, mental health or the usage of certain machinery, which they have identified as a need.

Meanwhile, prescribed networks are usually set up in a top-down way, for example in an organization (Coleman 2010 p.770-771). An example of a prescribed network would be if the federation of Swedish farmers (LRF) would have set up a network for woman farmers, which they currently do not have. Or if the European Union prescribe a network to elicit further collaboration and communication amongst a group of women.

The focus in this study will be on how the networks identified are designed, whether they are social, professional or informal in nature. Or if they are a combination of them. If they are emergent or prescribed networks is also important to consider as understanding why the networks were created can increase our understanding of why they are needed. Additionally, this thesis will look at whether the networks are online networks or real-life networks. Although, I will not compare the two and argue for which is better or worse. Instead, it will acknowledge that they are different and are created for different purposes.

The term social media means a highly interactive internet platform where individuals can discuss, share, create and co-create content in communities, according to Phillips (2018 p. 2-3). These communities are a collection of dispersed members with weak ties, who are not usually known or identifiable, but they share common interests. Farms are part of a complex cultural, social and environmental ecosystem. It is important to consider that farmers are not always isolated individuals, they are usually part of many different social networks. And they themselves commonly build support networks for their constructs of reality.

The Swedish researcher Carin Lann (1996 p.14) describes networks as a voluntary group of people working around an idea. People she has interviewed in her research described their experiences in women's networks as "breathing holes for recovery", "like coming home" or "getting confirmation that I am not alone". The benefits of women networking are many, and as a woman, you have a lot to gain if you choose to be part of a woman network (Carin Lann 1996 p.19-22). Lann believes that it will most likely lead to self-development, which in turn can lead to increased self-awareness and personal growth. Lann also believes that woman networking can be beneficial regarding career or business opportunities as it introduces new contacts.

A study conducted by Coleman (2010) showed that women participating in purely female networks experienced that networks were a great support system.

Meanwhile, the women who participated in mixed gender networks, highlighted that they experienced difficulties with speaking openly. They argued that there was a tendency for men to not admit their shortcomings in order to maintain a certain image, while the women-only networks had a more relaxed approach and teamwork regarding problem-solving.

4.4 Uses and gratification as a framework

This study will use Uses and Gratification as a framework to better understand women farmers communication within the networks as well as what benefits, or gratification, they fulfil from being members.

Uses and gratification theory "represents an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs" (Katz et al 1973 p.510). The theory suggests that a single mass medium can serve different functions for different individuals. People choose and use media platforms based on the benefits they believe they will gain and the level of access they have. It views media users as active participants in deciding what content they consume and choose to be a part of. Rather than engaging with the media passively, individuals are conscious and motivated in their choices. Additionally, it assumes that people understand the reasons behind their media preferences, and that they draw on this awareness to select media that fulfills their particular needs.

Stafford et al (2004 p. 268) identifies three potential types of users and gratifications of internet use: process gratification, content gratification and social gratification. To experience process gratifications users benefit from the enjoyment of using the sites, in comparison to the users who experience content gratification which are motivated by the pursuit of specific information. Social gratification accredits to the use of media for "interpersonal use and social networking".

This study focuses on both networks online as well as physical networks and will apply Stafford et al (2004 p.268) three types of internet use to the women's perceived experiences to answer and discuss ways that the networks can support the participating women and what gratification do they receive/fulfil.

It is worth addressing that some of the literature used in this study, especially in the theory section, is older. For example, Carin Lann is from 1996 and this of course is important to consider and be aware of. It has been difficult to find appropriate newer studies with a focus on networking for women, and especially

with a Swedish focus. This is something I have been attentive to, but I still consider the theories relevant to the discussion and empirical study I conducted.

5. Method and method-discussion

5.1 Semi structured interviews

In this qualitative study, I conducted face to face interviews with six women farmers that live and work in Sweden. The interviews involved unstructured and generally open-ended questions that were intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell and Creswell 2018 p.263-266). The qualitative interview aims to understand the world from the respondent's point of view (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014 p.17). It records people's attitudes, feelings and behaviours, and provides an in-depth but usually indicative picture about why people act or feel a certain way. Therefore, there was no reason for me as a researcher to deliberately make a random selection where the participating respondents consist of a compressed copy of the entire population. Instead, I strived to obtain a certain variation in the selection of the respondents (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014 p.17).

5.2 Selection of respondents

In this study nine woman farmers were contacted as potential interviewees, and six of them replied and agreed to be interviewed. They were contacted via email or messenger, and they were found either through connections or from the women's networks for farmers. One of the participants was identified from an article written about a local network for women farmers. The requirement to be selected was that they had to identify as a woman. They had to work as farmers, either full time or part time. They could be any type of farmer such as for example dairy, sheep, crop or chicken. An important demand was that they had to be a member or creator of a women's only network for farmers, that includes online networks, physical networks or both.

Note that because the women who are interviewed actively are members of networks for women farmers, they themselves in some way find them useful or fun to be a part of. Therefore, the focus will not be on women who chose to not be part of networks for women farmers and that perspective will not be included. To ensure that the respondents could consent as well as following ethical considerations they had to be 18 years of age. For it to be possible to carry out the interviews within the scope of a master thesis the participants needed to live within one and a half hours car ride from the city of Gävle in Sweden or be able to do the interview on zoom.

As a researcher I aimed to find interviewees that were participants in different networks and had different roles within them. I also strived for the women to have different ages and types of farms. The ages ranged from 22 to 59 and they all lived within 2 hours from Gävle except for two who did the interview via zoom.

5.3   The interview guide

The interview guide was constructed with themes as a starting point. The themes were:

What networks exist and what is discussed in them?
In what way can the networks support the women who participate?
Why are networks needed for women?
What motivate women to start a network (Specific questions for the women who started up networks)

Based on the themes a couple of questions were formulated related to each of the topics, which can be read in full in the Interview guide (appendix 1). When creating the questions the most important aspect was for them to be easy to understand and clearly formulated (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014 p.176). They needed to be open ended in nature so that the women would be able to say what they felt was most relevant and important. And so that they would not be guided into answering the questions in a particular way. I also avoided telling the women about my own thoughts or experiences to avert them trying to appease me with their answers.

5.4   The interviews

The interviewees received a consent form beforehand where they were informed that the data was going to be anonymized in order to, among other things, facilitate more authentic responses (Creswell and Creswell 2018 P. 263-266). The interviews were audibly recorded using a mobile device to ensure that nothing would be forgotten or left out as well as allowing for the interviewer to be in the moment and ask follow-up questions without halting the conversation by writing notes. Notes were instead written directly after the interview. The recordings were deleted after the analysis of the material was done. This was included in the consent form, and they were asked a second time before the interview started to ensure that they were informed and comfortable with the setup.

Two of the interviews were done over zoom. Nonverbal cues, body language, and the overall atmosphere of an in-person meeting are difficult to recreate online. This can make it challenging for both parties to accurately assess cultural fit and interpersonal dynamics. Considering the challenges of this beforehand, as well as getting access to interviewing women who otherwise had not been possible, made it useful. The other interviews were executed in person in the farmers own kitchen. Gathering data by actually talking directly to the farmers and seeing them behave and act within their own context is useful and the aim was to make the interviewees feel relaxed (Creswell and Creswell 2018 p.257).

One of the interviews in person was a group-interview with two women (farmer 1 and farmer 2) from the same online network for women farmers. What is important to consider when conducting an interview with more than one person is how the role of the interviewer changes. The interactions between the women reduces the interviewer's control over the course of the interview (Kvale and Brinkmann 2014 p.191-192). Making sure that both of them are answering and that one of them does not take over was important. The transcription was also affected as it was more unstructured and unclear. The group-interview made it possible to elicit more spontaneous and expressive thought as they had time to think while the other was speaking and they could bounce off each other's answer. But it may have also affected how open or honest they were.

The interviews took roughly 45 min and were done in Swedish. The material was mainly translated by the author, but also by using google translate.

5.5 The role of the researcher

An important aspect of a qualitative study is the role of the researcher. Creswell and Creswell (2018 p.260) discuss how reflexivity occurs when the researcher reflects on their own personal experiences and recognizes how it may shape their interpretation of the results. It is imperative to be aware of connections between the researcher and the respondents that may unduly influence the interpretations of the researcher.

Before conducting this study and writing my master's thesis my knowledge of agriculture and farming was limited. This can be considered a positive in the sense that I had no strong opinions on the theme beforehand, but it also meant having to do a lot of research and having to ask a lot of follow up questions in the interviews. I feared that my limited farming knowledge could be met with hesitation from the respondents. Upon reflection I felt that the distance from the farming community worked to my advantage as the women met me with interest

and enthusiasm. Chiswell and Wheeler (2016 p. 233) discuss positionality and the role of the researcher based on their own research which consist of their own interviews with farmers on the English countryside. Although their own paper focuses mainly on the young inexperienced woman researcher interviewing older male farmers in their homebase, some aspects are still relevant for this study where women farmers are interviewed.

The identity of me as a researcher is of particular relevance. Being a young woman needs to be considered as a factor that could have affected the way the interviewees responded to the questions. If I had been a man, the answers may have been different. Chiswell and Wheeler (2016 p.232-233) stress how your position as a non-farmer combined with your youth and gender may confirm your harmless and inexperienced identity. This can allow for more detailed responses from the interviewees. But I also want to reflect on to what extent the data I collected, and particularly personal stories were shared with me, because of these aspects of my identity.

As previously stated, the solitary nature of farming has resulted in increased feelings of loneliness as well as higher average levels of stress and suicide among farmers. When I conducted my interviews, the women sometimes mentioned or told me stories of hardship or abuse, which raise questions on how it affected both of us emotionally as well as the interview. Chiswell and Wheeler (2016 p.233-234) calls this phenomenon pain by proxy which highlights the difficulties of spending time with someone who in clearly effected or upset and not being able to support them. It has also been recognised that traditional gender roles and stereotypes can lead to participants feeling more able to confide in a woman researcher and share traumatic and stressful experiences (Chiswell and Wheeler 2016 p.233-234). This was something that happened to me in the first interview, where one of the women told me of friends who had experienced abuse from their husbands. The situation made me more aware, and I was able to prepare for it for the other interviews. One of the women also mentioned how it was nice to share about her experiences to a woman who could understand, which is worth reflecting on.

5.6 Analysis

To acquire a holistic understanding of the data, I first read through each interview in its entirety, without notetaking. Then the transcripts were analysed in an exploratory fashion. I used a thematic colour coding, where specific colours were assigned to different themes to visually identify trends and patterns.

The themes used in the interview guide served as a starting point when colour coding was conducted. The themes were:

What networks exist and what is discussed in them?
In what way can the networks support the women who participate?
Why are networks needed for women?
What motivate women to start a network (Specific questions for the women who started up networks)

To ensure that nothing of interest was left behind in the colour coding I kept a theme for "other", where things of interest that did not fit in with the themes could be saved and added in later if it appeared interesting and displayed multiple perspectives or agreement from all of them (Creswell and Creswell 2018 p.269). One of the themes that emerged from "other" was - how can the networks be improved. It was already a question asked in the interviews but it did not have a big focus. The last theme - what motivate women to start a network, was removed from the main analysis because not enough of the women interviewed had created any networks.

Carin Lann's (1996 p.16-18) concept of social, informal and professional networks were used to understand what the networks were used for by the women. Coleman's (2010 p. 770-771) description of emergent and prescribed networks were also used as codes to understand how/why the networks studied were created and by who.

Resilience theory was used as a theoretical framework to analyse why the networks were needed and what support the women could get from participating. Do they help in times of difficulty, for example when experiencing loneliness, having less neighbours or being burnt out? Smyth and Sweetman (2015 p. 406-408) highlight how girls and women usually are disproportionate victims when disasters happen as well as recognizing their significant role as crisis managers, ensuring that needs of their communities and families are met. Together with Berkes (2007) I used the framework to discuss the experiences of the women in my study.

When reading through the material I noticed how the women mentioned aspects regarding gratification and what they gain from the networks. It led to applying Users and Gratification theory described by Stafford et al (2004 p.268) and Katz et al (1973 p. 510). When analysing the transcriptions I used the terms process gratification, content gratification and social gratification as codes to identify the way these women actively used the networks to meet their needs. To

get a better understanding of newer networks online, I took inspiration from Phillips (2018 p.2-3) who, among other things, describes how members usually have weak ties even though they share common interests. I used Philips results and thoughts to analyse the experiences of the women in my study.

6. Findings

In this section I present and discuss the findings of my empirical study. I will present 5 themes that highlight my most important findings. They are: *Finding and building the right network*, which mainly answer research question one. *Why networks with only women farmers?* that primarily responds to research question 2. *The importance of being understood* and *Strength to leave abusive men* discuss both research question 2 and 3. *Wishes that the networks were more personal* does not necessarily answer a specific research question, but it raises important considerations.

As each theme is presented, it first highlights the main findings along with relevant quotes. Then it is discussed in relation to theory. Lastly all themes are brought together in a concluding discussion.

6.1 Finding and building the right network

Farmer 1 and farmer 2 are part of the same Facebook network for women farmers that have a few thousand members. The group is for women who are both farmers, live on a farm, work on a farm, are interested in starting a farm, hobby farmers, etc. The aim of the group is to be able to discuss anything that has to do with agriculture and share about everyday life on the farm.

Farmer 1 points out that when the network was starting up over 10 years ago it was a bit wobbly, and they had to exclude and mute members who were arguing or in other ways not behaving according to the guidelines.

> "Some people were writing as if they were talking to their best friend, and they did not think about the fact that a few thousands would see it. In the beginning they also had a bit of a problem that it was growing too quickly and it became overcrowded with members. (Farmer 1)"

Now when the network has existed for multiple years, they say that the group is a lot better. Although it still has gossip, people are more aware and think before they write. The topic of discussion varies from exchanging knowledge and sharing everyday life.

> "Absolutely everything is discussed, and a lot of it is knowledge like what types of tractors you use or if you have found a good machine. But people also want to celebrate

and share when their cow got a new calf. It is more like girl-talk, even though it is not always like that. But absolutely if someone has a problem. If someone just had a child and has issues with breast-feeding, of course we will help. But it is not overwhelmingly that, it is just as much related to farming. (Farmer 1)"

Farmer 2 is in her early twenties and says that she is not as involved in the Facebook group, she mainly observes to stay updated on what is happening. Instead, she describes how most people her age bracket are creating other types of online networks in other social media apps.

"We have other types of forums where it is less a concrete group and more that we have each other on social media, like snapchat, and we share our days on our 'stories' and then we comment on each others posts (Farmer2)"

Farmer 1 and 2 also say that it is usual to be members of different networks depending on what kind of a farmer you are, for example depending on if you have cows, hens or sheep.

Farmer 3 describes how when she started out as a farmer there was not any social media and that it has changed a lot how we network. She is a part of a women's network on Facebook that has thousands of members and was created by an author nearly a decade ago who wanted to collect thoughts from women who in any way or form were connected to farming and agriculture. The network highlights how men are the norm, cityfolk are the norm, a regular 9-5 job is the norm and therefore they are unique and worthy of being seen even though they do not follow the norm.

In the group there are posts about tips and tricks for farming, like the best tools or machines found by members. But there are also posts discussing the inequalities women face in the field of agriculture. For example, a video posted pointing out how out of 50, 39 of the most powerful and influential farmers in Sweden are men. The theme that is the most frequent in farmer 3's opinion is regarding generational change and ownership. She mentions how it is usual that the man owns the farm, and the woman just works there and that raises a lot of important questions.

Underneath is an example of what a post asking for help and advice on ownership of a farm looks like in the group. In the comments people give advice on the lawyers they hired or how they formulated their contracts.
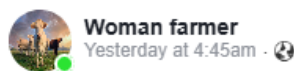
Hello all wise people! I think there are many in this group who could give good input to my thoughts and I don't think I'm alone in thinking about the following:

I took over my parents' farm two years ago. After that I met my partner and now we have plans to move in together. Of course, then 1000 questions arise about the legal and financial aspects and I think there are several of you who have been in both his and my situation and can see the matter from both sides. The farm is my personal property, my father still lives here and we are planning to change houses (and get a big house with a lot of renovation work on our shoulders …) in connection with my boyfriend moving here. I don't have any children, but he has two from previous relationships. There will be no children together. My boyfriend obviously doesn't want to just feel like a "tenant" with me, but I don't want to let him into ownership too early if things were to "go wrong" between us, so to speak.

We both work outside the farm but want to get more income from it over time and in the long term so that it is possible to live longer on the farm. Would love to receive some input from those of you who have been in the same situation on what to do and what not to do. Preferably from "both sides" so to speak - those of you who own a farm and those of you who are moving to one with a farm.

Tips on a good lawyer who can help you write sensible cohabitation agreements etc. and has knowledge of agriculture would be gratefully received. If you don't want to write here, feel free to send a message if you want. Thanks in advance!

Woman farmer #2 We took the help of a lawyer to agree to remove the cohabitation law, it is not good if one person owns due to 50% division upon separation. We have also written a debt agreement as I have money from the sale into a new farm. We will take the help of a will as I have children from a previous relationship. Write to me privately and we can talk further.

Figure 1. Picture shows an example of a Facebook post from one of the online networks for woman farmers. The picture has been AI-generated. The author has removed certain parts of the text that were not relevant and translated it.

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Farmer 4 was invited to join a women's only network created by the European Union. It is a project with the ambition of more women connecting and sharing their experiences with each other. The project travels around the country and a few years ago they were in her hometown.

> "I know a woman in another town who is active in it. And she had given a presentation regarding her company and so then she asked me, couldn't you give a presentation too? So, it was really fun. It wasn't just about agriculture, it was female entrepreneurship that was the focus. There were about 30 of us there and it created this idea, should we have a Christmas activity. And from there this collaboration and cooperation was born, just from this mingling event. (Farmer 4)"

During the networking event that had been set up they discussed themes like advertisement and how to reach out to your customers. Farmer 4 says that the event opened up the possibility to talk to people you knew of but did not really know well.

Farmer 5 highlights how she is involved in multiple facebook groups with thousands of members in all of them. Because the groups have so many members, there are a lot of posts everyday.

> "It is pretty common for questions or complaining arising from women not being able to own the farm or that they do not have a salary and how hard that is (Farmer 5)"

Farmer 6 has started multiple networks for women over the years, both online and physical networks. One of the networks is a physical network that aims to meet up every other month for lunch with the ambition that the women can find new ways to work together and collaborate. And this made it possible to find people you click with and you can benefit from each other.

> "I find collaboration interesting and working together to find a solution can make us feel strong and accomplished. It was not my intention from the start to create multiple networks but it just kinda happened. (Farmer 6) "

Farmer 6 also created a Facebook group for women who want to live only from their farm though self-catering. And she says that a lot of what is posted and what kinds of people that want to join varies through the years. But the main discussions have been about self-realization and how to escape the "regular life" and the "regular nine to five office job.

"Today a lot of the focus is on how life and the farm can be suited for Instagram, so it has changed a bit and when we started out social media was not nearly as big as it is today. We have always aimed to keep it open so that people can talk about whatever they want but we have said no to discussions about religion and politics because it is so hard to moderate. (Farmer 6)"

6.1.1 Emerging networks, ownership and adapting to online

There are different kinds of networks that the women farmers use and are members in. Underneath is a table presenting them.

Table 1. Networks the interviewed women are members in. Note that some of them were members in other networks too, but that these were the main ones they highlighted.

	Number of members	Online or Physical	Emergent or Prescribed	Farmers who are members	Notes
Network 1	2000	Online (Facebook)	Emergent	Farmer 1, 2 and 5	
Network 2	2500	Online (Facebook)	Emergent	Farmer 3	
Network 3	30	Physical	Prescribed	Farmer 4	
Network 4	3000	Online (Facebook)	Emergent	Farmer 5	
Network 5	20	Physical	Emergent	Farmer 6 (Creator)	
Network 6	3000	Online (Facebook)	Emergent	Farmer 6 (Creator)	

As seen in table 1 there are six main networks that the women are members in, some of the women are members in the same network. Two of them are physical, they have 20 and 30 members respectively. The remaining four are online networks, all of them Facebook-groups with a few thousand members. All networks except for one are described as emergent, which according to Coleman (2010 p.770) means a group that was set up by individuals who identified a need that a network could fulfill. Some of those needs were mentioned by the women, for example legal issues such as ownership and generational succession which were mentioned by farmer 4. Or to find new ways to work together and collaborate as said by farmer 6. The one physical network that Coleman (2010

p.770) would call prescribed is network number 4, which was created by the European Union with the intention of having more women connect and share their experiences with each other. It then led to more activities set up by the women and they started collaborating more.

The networks that this thesis study are mainly a combination of the three networks mentioned in the theory– social, professional and informal, emphasised by Carin Lann (1996 p.16-18). These networks, established by women or organizations, are designed to fulfil a social role for women farmers, providing spaces to engage in discussions related to farming and agriculture within predominantly informal settings.

Farmer 2 is in her early twenties and mentions how the new generation of farmers do not appear to be using the same types of networks as older generations. This opens for an interesting discussion on what a network is and what it will be in the future. She primarily uses Snapchat to communicate, which has a different format than for example Facebook where big groups of people can be members. Snapchat is more visual, and she publishes videos and pictures of her everyday life to her coworkers and friends. A few of the other farmers also discuss how the current online networks on social media have changed and evolved.

The Facebook post used as an example on generational ownership is interesting from many viewpoints. The woman argues that she needs to discuss the theme with other women who understand the struggle and might have been in similar positions. She requests recommendations on lawyers who will understand agriculture and that ownership of a farm is complicated. It accentuates the difficulty when a farm is inherited in the family, which means that you must think carefully about whether it could be sold or left to someone outside the family in the event of a separation or death.

"I don't think I am alone in thinking about the following" especially highlights how she is seeking advice from people that can relate to the situation and demonstrates what Carin Lann (1996 p.14) writes – how women networks can be "confirmation that I am not alone".

Farmers 1 and 2 stress how the Facebook network in the beginning was wobbly and had issues with members not behaving according to the guidelines. This relates to Phillips (2018 p.2-3), who points out how communities online are a collection of dispersed members with weak ties. The members are usually not known or identifiable, but they are in the network because they share common interests (in this case agriculture). It opens for arguing and unserious posts

without it leading to real life consequences. The internet is a relatively new phenomenon, and individuals have had to adapt and learn how to navigate it. It is constantly changing and now most of them have learned that what you write online will be seen by thousands of people, according to farmer 1.

6.2 Why networks with only women farmers?

Farmer 6 and 4 proclaim that the reason women networks are needed is because our society is male-dominated and everything is made by and for men. Because of this, women can find strength and community that they otherwise do not get in society. Farmer 6 highlights how men historically have been able to connect, strengthen and network amongst themself, and especially within the farming sphere, something that farmer 4 also mentions.

> "It can be quite isolating and especially because agriculture has previously been quite masculine and it is a lot easier when you are some big farmer somewhere in the village with all the money and land and stuff like that. And for the rest of us who, in their opinion, are just fooling around with our little wheelbarrows and should not be able to call ourselves farmers. There can be a strength in actually meeting (in networks) so you can stand up to that kind of thing that we have to deal with a lot. They think it is nonsense to have an Instagram or only have 300 chickens. I think you need to support each other and be there for each other. (Farmer 4)"

There are a lot of networks online for farmers who are mixed, where both men and women can share about their week or give tips and tricks. All of the farmers interviewed are not only members of women networks, but also members of mixed online networks.

> "Men in these mixed groups tend to assert themselves, it becomes a penis measuring contest. And then it is not so fun to be there, I don't need that. It is quite brutal actually." (farmer 4)

Farmer 1 and 2 also discuss the differences in online women's only networks for farmers and mixed networks. They point out that sometimes when women ask questions, cocky men show up in the comments to make fun of them for not knowing. And although there are a lot of nice men who show up with support and knowledge, the men who are rude make it not worth it. In their opinion there is a stark difference in tone and a harsher climate, which then makes the women's network easier to ask questions in if you are new or just need support.

"(about the mixed network) Someone can ask a question about something that they might not know about or that is hard for them personally and then, instead of just helping and showing, they start to question why they do not know that. So it is very harsh in that way and I can see a huge difference between the groups. (Farmer 1)"

Unlike the others, farmers 3 and 5 say that they are part of women's networks to stay connected to friends and get updates, and that gender in itself is not an important factor when seeking advice or support. Farmer 5 mentions how she has a lot of women farmers in her village that she considers close friends and therefore although she is a member of a few online networks, she is not active.

"There are a lot of people in the groups and there is a lot written and I can not relate to most of it. I like to look through them, but I do not always feel we have the same problems. Sometimes more fact-based problems arise and those I can find interesting, there are a lot of people out there who are very knowledgeable. But otherwise there is a lot of complaining in the group that I cannot relate to. Through my work I also meet up with a lot of other farmers and then I can discuss what might be considered as more ´womanly´, like how to balance work and the pressure you feel about having time for the family. I can also share with my close friends in the area who also are farmers and we can talk about anything because we are all in the same situation. (Farmer 5)"

Farmer 3 mentions that the main differences are the different themes that are discussed, in the women only networks they discuss the themes of ownership and the family. But her own household does not have questions in relation to those themes, she mainly just wants the possibility to connect with friends.

6.2.1 Networking as a tool of resilience

As seen, farmers 4 and 6 stress the historical male dominance in farming and see women's networks as a necessary counterspace for empowerment and resistance. Farmer 4 points out the dismissive attitudes towards women, especially with small-scale operations, and how networking can combat isolation. This echoes Carin Lann (1996 p.14) discussion where she states that women's experiences in women networks can be seen as "breathing holes for recovery".

Similar sentiments are echoed by farmers 1 and 2, noting that male members in mixed groups often ridicule questions, making those spaces unwelcoming for learning. Similar to Coleman's study (2010), the farmers in this study also point out the tendency for men to not admit their shortcomings in mixed networks for

farmers. That the men often assert themselves and that it can be quite brutal for the women to speak up and ask questions. This is especially mentioned by farmer 4 who compares the men's behaviour to a penis measuring contest.

Why women choose women's networks, and especially what they can gain from it, can be discussed through the lens of Users and Gratification theory, where both Katz et al (1973 p.510) and Strafford (2004, p. 268) have been mentioned. Escaping hostile environments into a more supportive and safe space is emphasized especially by farmer 4 and 6 and can be attributed to social gratification. It fulfils needs for companionship, connection, and belonging by enabling users to establish and maintain social ties.

Farmers 3 and 5, on the other hand, downplay the role of gender by viewing these networks more as social or informational spaces rather than political or emotional lifelines. Seeking knowledge, advice, and information (as seen in all farmers, particularly Farmer 5's interest in "fact-based problems") can be seen as content gratification according to Stafford (2004 p.268).

Having the opportunity to create opportunities for self-organisation, is something Berkes (2007 p.283) identifies as an important factor for building resilience. The importance of networking with those who share lived experiences becomes apparent, some of the women express that they trust and feel safer with other women when discussing farming and personal issues. Even farmers 3 and 5, who downplay the role of gender, still use local woman friendships and informal networks for similar reasons, though not under the same explicitly feminist framing.

As previously stated by Smyth and Sweetman (2015 p.413), resilience is gendered and women's capacity to thrive under pressure is shaped by structural inequalities and social norms. Farmer 4's reference to being dismissed for "just fooling around with a wheelbarrow" reflects gendered resilience and how there can be a strength in actually meeting (in networks) so you can stand up to that kind of thing. Women's networks are tools of resilience, spaces where women build collective strength, knowledge, and coping mechanisms.

The clear distinction between the tone and reception in mixed vs. women-only networks indicates that women choose platforms that best align with their emotional, social, and informational needs.

6.3 The importance of being understood

The need to have a support system of people who understand you is mentioned by most of the women. Farmer 1 proclaims that being a farmer is not a job, but a lifestyle, and not a lot of people can understand that way of life. Because of this it is nice to have a community where everyone knows and has an understanding.

> "It can be nice to know that you have a community, there are people who work everyday and hate life, and they might go through a destructive spiral. But then they talk within the network and they can get support and get cheered on. If I would have lived here without being in the network I would not have known any other farmer. And now I say hi to a lot of people in the village. (Farmer 1)"

Farmer 1 also mentions how she has gained multiple close friends that she now exchanges services with and buys products from.

> "We just connected on social media and now when I see her in real life I feel like I have known her for years, although I have only actually met her twice. It is awesome. (Farmer 1)"

Farmer 2 also highlights the feeling of having a support network with people that can understand how her work affects her everyday life.

> "Those who are outside can not really understand everything that can happen and that sometimes you cannot give them a specific time to meet up. It is comforting to talk to someone who also understands. (Farmer 2)"

It is common that the women looking for support in the networks are burnt out or have a life that is stressful, according to farmer 6. She says that having these physical meetings are very important to make sure that you get to meet other people and do something outside of the farm. Through the meetings, which are held out in the countryside they can show off their community they can find a common ground and togetherness.

> "A lot of the women in the network say that if they are talking about their farm life while at their other job people might be horrified. For example if I were to talk about the slaughter of a rabbit, people at a regular job site would be squeamish. So the space to talk about my farm life might not exist there. So it is valuable to have the network and knowing that people there think like I do and we can talk about it. (Farmer 6)"

Farmer 6 also mentioned how she might have shut down some of the activities that they have within the network because they are too much work, if she had not noticed how important they are to some members.

"A lot of people are writing about how much it means to them when we have the Christmas present exchange, and how this might be the only present they get this year because they might not have a family. And I find it nice that we can do something that important. (Farmer 6)"

Some of the members might also find a voice and confidence though the community in the networks. Farmer 1 gives an example:

"There is a woman who has been bullied her entire life, especially by her relatives, and for her it has probably meant a lot to talk to other people online. She is very shy but she is very social in the group and because she has written a lot she has really blossomed. And she has written about how the network had given her power and how she has evolved from a little grey mouse to an eagle. (Farmer 1)"

6.3.1 Feeling seen and support through hard times

The women farmers emphasize the importance of being understood within the networks. Farming is described as a lifestyle rather than a job, one that outsiders often fail to comprehend. As such, these women find value in connecting with others who share similar experiences. This is especially stressed by Farmer 2 who says that "it is comforting to talk to someone who understands". This relates to the discussion regarding ownership and generational succession mentioned earlier where the women expressed the need to find a lawyer who understands what it means to own a farm and work in agriculture.

Another example is the need to find a safe space to express certain aspects of their lives, such as for example animal slaughter, which was mentioned by farmer 6. A situation where she may have been judged in other settings.

You could argue that the networks foster collective resilience, supporting women through isolation, stress, burnout and even family estrangement (Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). Engaging in supportive dialogue or rituals like Christmas gift exchanges can offer emotional relief and joy, even during hardship. It also reflects emotional labour and care work, which are often invisible but essential aspects of resilience for women.

The network allows the women to learn from each other's experiences, share knowledge about farm life, and validate each other's realities. Farmer 1 said that she has gained multiple close friends that she exchanges services and buys products from, demonstrating content gratification (Stafford 2004 p. 268).

6.4 Wishes that the networks were more personal

Farmer 4 highlighted that most networks online for women farmers are, in her opinion, too broad and unrelatable. There are thousands of members and a lot of people who ask questions and send pictures. But it does not feel close and intimate when you interact.

> "Discussing with someone who has over 2000 cows, when I have way less than that. We're not on the same level in any way and they have it on such a grand scale, and I have it in a completely different way… Both of us are women, but other than that we don't have much in common. There is nothing we can network about that can contribute. Consequently, it is sometimes hard to find the right group where you fit in. There are a lot of them and sometimes it just feels like - which one should I join? (Farmer 4)"

Because of this, farmer 4 mentions that it has led to more physical networks locally. But, then they usually network alongside their partners. Although, if a question/thought arises that she feels needs to be discussed with another woman they discuss it amongst themselves. She calls it a tiny and local network that works great for them.

When asked if she would like a local network with women farmers she points out that there are only 6 women in the area who are farmers, and therefore it would be a bit too narrow.

Farmer 6 also raises the issue that a lot of the networks, both online and physical, are missing the depth and how she wishes they were more private and that people dared to open up more.

> "It is what I wished I could find, networks that would meet up more often and that you find the right group where you can share more about yourself in depth (Farmer 6)"

6.4.1 Needing better connections

Although the women in this study say that the networks are useful and needed in many ways, they still express room for improvement, and especially the need for more personal interactions. As Phillips (2018 p.2-3) stated, the members in online communities have weak ties with each other and can easily be anonymous. Despite being part of the same network, members may know little about one another. At the same time, connecting with like-minded women locally can be difficult, especially in rural areas where proximity is limited. The participants express a desire for a type of network that currently does not exist, one that fosters deeper connections, trust, and emotional openness. You can argue that there is a lack of gratification that they want met (Katz et al 1973 p.510).

6.5 Strength to leave abusive men

All of the farmers mentioned at some point how these networks have been a good support for women in abusive relationships. It can be an outlet where they can share their experiences and receive support and help. And through the group they can get the courage and power to leave.

> "There are a lot of mean and horrible men out there, and there are a lot of bad stories about women out on the farms who work for free and their husbands are awful to them. They have to attend to the kitchen and home. But through this network they can get support, if someone has a cottage they can come and stay there while they are figuring their life out and so on. It is like a sisterhood in a way." (farmer 1)

Farmer 6 has created multiple women's networks over the years, both online and physical. One of those groups is a facebook group with 3000 members and she mentions that they have worked hard to not have more members. For her it is important that all of the members have an interest in the theme of farming or self-catering, but also that the group is not too big so that they can keep the group safe for the women to discuss anything. She mentions that sometimes she has declined new members for this reason.

> "And then because we want to keep it a safe space, we've also let in a lot of questions about mental health. Women who leave relationships, so asking for advice when they need to leave a relationship which is destructive. And it's great when we've had women who have written, we've followed them for several years, how they've written and just getting things off their chest. And then a post appears that now I've left and then it can be like months or a year and then an update comes - now we're here and we're doing

well. That they feel that they're so safe in the group that they can actually write something like that. (Farmer 6)"'

6.5.1 A sisterhood to get help from

The networks that the women in this study are a part of serve a huge and important role for women farmers who are or have been in abusive relationships. It does not only function as a safe space for women to discuss matters regarding farming, but also as a safe haven where they can get help from a dangerous situation. Lann (1996 p. 19-22) voices the belief that women who take part in networks will most likely gain more self-awareness and personal growth. It can lead to a woman who might have not realized she is in an abusive relationship realize her situation.

As stated by farmer 1 - "through this network they can get support, if someone has a cottage they can come and stay there while they are figuring their life out and so on. It is like a sisterhood in a way." Sometimes you might need someone to tell you and support you through communication that you need to escape a situation. But in the cases where you might not have the money it can be life-saving that women in these networks give you help with finding shelter. Women's networks can be seen as tools of resilience, spaces where women build collective strength, knowledge, and coping mechanisms.

There is also a dilemma presented by farmer 6, connected to what was previously highlighted regarding the need for more personal interactions. She says that she wants to ensure that the network is a safe space and that the group therefore is not too big. They want it to be personal, and they want everyone to feel safe enough to share. But then who is excluded? And how do you determine who gets to be a member? It raises thoughts that can be studied further.

7. Concluding discussion

This study aims to deepen the understanding of women farmers' experiences with agricultural networks designed specifically for women. It seeks to explore how these networks benefit and support women farmers. While existing research has highlighted various advantages of such networks, there is a need for further investigation into how women farmers themselves perceive these networks, especially in geographical regions like Sweden that have received less attention in earlier studies.

Additionally, gaining insight into what women farmers, an underrepresented group in agricultural research, identify as beneficial or in need of improvement within these networks is valuable. Women in agriculture frequently encounter gender-based barriers, making access to supportive networks particularly important. As the number of farms declines and the distance between them grows, opportunities for connection, shared experiences, and mentorship among women farmers may become increasingly limited.

The research questions for this thesis will be explicitly answered underneath as well as my most important findings.

Self-made networks as a response to a need
The women farmers in this study participate in a range of both physical and online networks, each serving different needs and offering varied forms of support. As shown in Table 1, six main networks were identified, two physical and four online. Most of these are emergent networks, created by individuals responding to specific needs such as legal advice, succession planning, or opportunities for collaboration (Coleman 2010 p.770-771). The one prescribed network, initiated by the European Union, has successfully evolved into a more collaborative and self-driven community.

The networks that this thesis studies are mainly a combination of the three networks mentioned by Carin Lann (1996 p.16-18): social, professional and informal. For farmers, work and private life are often mixed together, not separate spheres like a 9-5 job where you go home afterwards and let it all go. This is reflected in the networks that combine features from social networks, which can confirm the feeling that you are not alone and that you can turn to these people for support. At the same time, the networks provide a place to discuss work-related themes with a focus on business problems. Finally, it is a place for like-minded

people with an interest in agriculture as seen in informal networks. The networks identified in this study are created by women or organisations with the intention of serving a social function for the women farmers while discussing themes related to farming and agriculture in a mostly informal setting.

Within these networks, key themes of discussion include legal complexities around farm ownership and inheritance, challenges of succession within families, and the desire to connect with others who truly understand the realities of life as a woman in agriculture.

A safe space in a man's world

For some, women-only networks are a strategic response to structural inequality. For others, they are more about personal connection and shared life rhythms. But in all cases, they reflect a gendered negotiation of space, power, and survival, highlighting how networking platforms can be tools of both resilience and resistance (Smyth and Sweetman 2015 p.413).

The farmers proclaim that the reason women networks are needed is because in our society everything is made by and for men. Because of this, women can find strength and community that they otherwise do not get in society. Historically men have been able to connect, strengthen and network amongst themself, and especially within the farming sphere. Another reason mentioned by the farmers is how male members in mixed groups often ridicule questions, making those spaces unwelcoming for learning. As shown by Coleman (2010 p.770-771), men often assert themselves and it can be quite challenging for the women to speak up and ask questions.

Collective resilience and escaping abuse

Women's networks can function as vital support systems, where resilience is fostered through shared experiences, wisdom, and mutual empowerment (Berkes 2007). You could argue that the networks foster collective resilience, supporting women through isolation, stress, burnout and even family estrangement (Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). Participating in supportive conversations or traditions like exchanging Christmas gifts can bring comfort and happiness, even in difficult times. Feeling safe to share thoughts that other people might not understand is valuable to ensure that the need for companionship, connection, and a sense of belonging is met (Strafford 2004 p. 268).

As stated earlier by Bjornestad et al (2019 p.109), depression symptoms and mental health issues are not uncommon amongst american farmers. This is also highlighted by some of the women in this study who mention burnout and feelings of loneliness. Networking can serve as a valuable alternative to traditional face-to-face counselling, helping to make mental health services more accessible to those in rural farming communities.

The future of networks and the need for a personal connection

In addition to previous research which shows how networks support when experiencing mental health issues, this study also shows that networks have played a vital role for women farmers who are currently in, or have previously experienced, abusive relationships. These networks offer more than just a space to discuss farming; they also provide a safe and supportive environment where women can seek help and protection from harmful situations.

Based on these findings, it is interesting to consider what women farmers, a group that has been underrepresented in agricultural studies, highlight as helpful or what needs to be improved with the networks. While the women in this study acknowledge that the networks are valuable and necessary in many respects, they also point out areas for improvement, particularly the need for more personal interactions. They mention how they previously have had issues with members not following rules. And despite being in a network together you might not know a lot about each other. Feeling safe to share, as well as how these networks are built and managed, is connected. When the networks get too big, people might not want to share hardships or personal details (Phillips 2018 p.2-3). But excluding or limiting members is also difficult. It is a dilemma where people can feel excluded or arguments might arise.

Considering what networks for women farmers might look like in the future, and what challenges will emerge and remain that makes women networks needed, is interesting. Not only from a technological standpoint but also from a societal and cultural perspective. Farmer 2 already demonstrates that such a change is taking place, when she mentions that most people her age use different types of social media than the previous generations.

In conclusion, from the perspective of all frameworks, the importance of community, shared experience, and mutual recognition emerges as central to the women's success, resilience, and growth, both as farmers and as individuals. You can argue that these networks help women farm not just land, but also dignity and confidence in a landscape built by and for men.

8.   Suggestions for further research

When I started this study there was going to be a research question focusing on the experiences of women who start their own agricultural networks. Unfortunately, I did not have enough time or resources to connect with enough women who started their own networks. But it would have been rewarding and interesting to continue studying as farmer 6, who started several networks, emphasized many interesting things that did not fit into this study. For example, she highlighted that she had to endure death threats and hate mail from men and women who felt that the groups she started were discriminatory against men. She also talked about what it is like to work as an admin in the groups, having to decide what is okay and what is not okay, which takes a lot of time out of her day. Interviewing more women who have started and run networks would definitely be a valuable study that could show a different perspective on women's networks for farmers.

This master's thesis is also broad and has not limited the types of networks included. A study that had specified the focus on a certain type of network for women farmers could have offered deeper and more targeted insights. For example, a study that looked only at social networks that exist online could have allowed for a more detailed understanding of how these platforms function, the kinds of support they offer, and the demographics they attract. Or a study that compares networks that meet in real life with those that exist online could reveal important differences in accessibility and/or trust-building. Some of the women mention how there sometimes are different networks for different types of farmers (dairy, sheep, grain), which could make an interesting subject for a study. A different choice of method could also have yielded other discoveries, such as conducting a netnographic or ethnographic empirical collection.

Another avenue for future research concerns the changing nature of networks in the digital age. For instance, farmer 2 expressed that she does not often participate in traditional platforms such as Facebook groups, but instead uses other platforms, for example Snapchat. This suggests a generational shift in how support and information are sought which raises questions about what forms women's agricultural networks may take in the future, whether through newer digital platforms, face-to-face gatherings, or hybrid models. Studies that spotlight younger farmers' usage of networks would be most interesting.

Lastly, it is equally important to explore the perspectives of women who consciously choose not to participate in any networks, women-only or mixed. Understanding their reasons, whether rooted in past experiences, personal

preferences, or systemic barriers, could offer critical insights into the inclusivity and accessibility of existing network structures. In summary, women's networks in farming represent a complex and evolving field of inquiry. Further research has the potential not only to deepen our understanding of these networks but also to inform policy and practice that better supports the diverse realities of women in agriculture.

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Popular science summary

It's a sunny and snowy day in February on a Swedish farm. I'm about to interview a woman about her experiences with women's networks for farmers, something she's involved in. We're sitting in the coffee room with cinnamon buns and coffee in hand. Two male researchers from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and Uppsala University are also there to investigate genes in cows. They're waiting to talk to an expert and follow that person for an afternoon. We talk for a while about what it's like to study the agricultural world, they're fascinated that I've chosen to interview women's experiences and give me thoughts and tips that they've observed.

- I've noticed that women don't usually drive the tractors out in the forest, but that it's mainly the men who do, says one of them.

- Ah, but on this farm I'm the one driving the tractor while my husband is responsible for other things, says the woman I was going to interview who also owns the farm.

It gets awkward for a while, but then we talk about other things. A woman comes in with a big bag, she takes a bun and joins the conversation. One of the guys then starts telling her about the project they are researching and explains to her why genes are so important to study. He tells her what genes are and what the research has been like in recent years, she nods occasionally to show that she is listening.

- Yes, thank you, I know, I am an expert in the subject and have been researching genes for over 20 years, she states wearily after several minutes of explanation.

The silence in the room is total when the man realizes who she is. That she is the expert they are supposed to follow. They leave for their tour and I am left alone with the owner of the farm. We begin the interview I had planned.

In that moment, I understood something that I had previously been unable to take in, only to imagine. What it can be like to be an expert in something, and then have a man explain it to you as if he is doing you a favor. This is an example of how many women have it in the agricultural industry, an industry designed by and for men.

In Sweden you can find a lot of different networks about agriculture specifically made by women, for women, both online and in real life. Many of those networks have emerged out of the #metoo movement in 2017 and is a space where they can

share knowledge, questions and experience in a safe environment. A lot of those groups have thousands of members with multiple posts a day. The aim for my study was to investigate how networking with other women benefits women farmers, and how it supports them as well as what kinds of networks exist and what themes are highlighted. And I interviewed 6 women who participate in such networks.

Six main networks were identified, two physical and four online. Most of these are emergent networks, created by individuals responding to specific needs such as legal advice, succession planning, or opportunities for collaboration. The one prescribed network, initiated by the European Union, evolved into a more collaborative and self-driven community. The networks that this thesis studies are mainly a combination of social, professional and informal.

Some women are members of women-only networks to deal with unfair treatment or inequality. Others join because they want to connect with people who understand their daily lives. Either way, these networks help women find support, gain confidence, and stand up for themselves. They can also be a useful alternative to traditional counselling, especially for women living in rural farming areas where mental health services are harder to access. This study also found that these networks have been helpful for women farmers who are going through, or have gone through, abusive relationships. Even though the women appreciate these networks and find them helpful, they also say that the networks could be better, especially by including more chances for personal interaction.

Acknowledgements

I want to give the biggest thank you in the world to my incredible supervisor Ann Grubbström, whom without I fear I would have never dared to fully dive into the world of agriculture and women farmers. You have been my biggest supporter and given insightful advice and thoughts throughout this journey.

Thank you to all the wonderful teachers at SLU who have taught me so much about environmental communication and myself these past two years. It has been such a pleasure.

Thank you to my mom and dad who have spent hours reading my writing, buying me sushi and cheering me on. It means the world.

Thank you to James for being my rock and biggest cheerleader when I questioned every decision I have ever made.

Thank you to Patricia, Maria, Emma and the other girlies for all these years. Our trip to Malta was so much fun and I know we will all have incredible futures!

Appendix 1

Interview guide:

Introductory questions

We can start by you telling me about yourself and how you got into farming?
Who do you have who works with you on the farm?
Do you have neighbours who are farmers and what is your relationship with them like?
Who do you usually turn to if you need an answer to a question or support?

Main questions

Which networks/groups/pages specifically for female farmers are you/we part of?
In what way(s) do you participate in the group?
What is usually discussed in the group?
Are there specific questions/things/themes that recur?
Are you part of any networks that have met physically? And if so, how was it?

What motivated you to join the network?
In what way is the group rewarding for you?
Have you made any contacts from the network that you now know outside the group?

Why do you think it is important to be part of networks and collaborate with other women in agriculture?
What do you think motivates women to start networks?
Are you part of any other networks for farmers that are not specifically for women? (If so, in what way do you feel they are different?)
If you could wish, what additional networks would be needed?

Closing/open questions

What does the future look like?
Is there anything else you would like to share?

Specific questions for those who created groups:

Can you tell us what led you to start a network for women in agriculture?
What were your expectations of the group?

How many people are currently in the group?

Can you tell us about the network meetings you have held? What did you do and how did it go?

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