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## **Farm, family, and myself: Farm women dealing with family breakup**

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## **Farm, family, and myself: Farm women dealing with family breakup**

Despite the rising divorce rate among farm families in Norway, surprisingly little research has examined these breakups. Drawing on interviews with farm women whose marital or cohabiting relationships broke down, we explore the contradictions between individualization and the moral responsibility embedded in the patriarchal discourse of the family farm. We ask whether farm family dissolution represents a break with patriarchal ideology and practice and thus threatens the survival of the family farm. A key finding is the struggle to balance establishing new lives for themselves with meeting their felt obligations to the farm. None of the women exercised their full legal rights if they worried that it might destroy the farm business. By ensuring the survival of the farm and the well-being of their children, the women's handling of divorce conforms to cultural conventions and protects the family farm.

**Keywords:** divorce; farm women; individualization; patriarchy; family farming; Norway

### **Introduction**

Recent rural and agricultural research has been concerned with the relations between gendered or patriarchal structures of power and family farming and has documented ongoing changes in the position of women within agriculture. From being unpaid assistants to full-time male farmers, they have become full-time farmers themselves or taken jobs off the farm in rural villages or towns (Brandth 2002; Haugen 1994, 1998; Bennett 2004; Riley 2009). Farm women today are recognized as making more independent choices and assuming increasingly visible positions both on and off the farm (O'Hara 1998; Shortall 1999; Riley 2009), and the discourses surrounding gender in agriculture are being reframed. Nevertheless, patriarchal structures and relations have not been eradicated (Kelly and Shortall 2002; Brandth 2006; Pini 2007; Brandth and Haugen 2010). Indeed, some researchers have found evidence of women's

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implication in the reproduction of those structures by contributing their off-farm income, enabling husbands to continue farming when the enterprise is financially unsustainable (Shortall 1992; O'Hara 1998; Bennett 2004). The patriarchal discourse of family farming is hard to resist because it so profoundly shapes farm family members' sense of identity. In focusing on family breakup among farmers, this article explores the tension between patriarchy and women's changing position in the context of divorce. Little research attention has been paid to what happens when farm couples part, either in Norway or internationally. This article addresses farm women's experiences of family breakup in Norway, exploring how they handle the tensions and dilemmas involved in ways that sustain rather than break the webs of connectedness that define the family farm.

Divorce is a common phenomenon in most Western countries. In Norway the divorce rate has roughly quadrupled since the beginning of the 1960s (Statistics Norway 2012a). Although farmers are less likely to divorce than the population as a whole, their divorce rate is rising (Follo and Haugen 2010). Rising rates of divorce and cohabitation are indications of growing family diversity in the countryside. On family farms, the dissolution of couple relationships is a complex process that involves special challenges posed by the familial basis of the enterprise. One explanation of rising divorce rates is that women have become more autonomous and empowered (Moxnes 1990). Contemporary concerns surrounding divorce are no longer based on simple moral condemnation. Rather, divorce is seen as a process to be managed so that its negative effects on those involved are ameliorated (Smart and Neale 1999, 113). Moral concerns are deeply implicated in the management of divorce.

Agriculture in Norway, as in many other countries, is typically organized as a family business characterized by the co-location of work and home. Although the law governing succession is gender neutral, most farms are still transferred from one generation to the next

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along the patrilineal line. In general women have come to the farms on which they live and work as adults on very different terms from men.

A family farm is based on the couple's joint contribution, and the involvement of the partner is often a key factor in its success. Numerous studies have shown that the majority of farm women are actively involved in farming and participate, albeit to varying degrees, in nearly all types of activities, even though their work has been invisible and unrecognized by society (Sachs 1983; Alston 1995; Pini 2007). In the event of divorce, legal rulings and submissions in family court commonly fail to adequately account for women's contributions to the family farm (Voyce 1993; Scutt 1997). Considering the interconnections of land ownership, gender and power, Shortall (1999) has concluded that established farming principles provide men with more power than women and that property ownership is central to that power. This configuration of work and family contradicts contemporary ideals of gender-equal intimate partnerships.

Farm couples' breakups are especially fraught with problems because family farming represents a way of life that is deeply rooted in a marital economy (Solheim 2012) and historical patterns of inheritance and culture (Price and Evans 2005). Heterosexual relationships, which provide the basis for the continuation of the family farm into the next generation, are an important organizing principle of agricultural societies. Indeed, according to Little (2007), marriage is essential to the definition of normalcy in rural areas. Women's reproductive activities are crucial to sustaining the farm and keeping it in the family (Whatmore 1991).

According to Price and Evans (2006), family farm survival has been dependent on women's compliance with a patriarchal ideology that demands that they be 'good as gold'. This compliance might be challenged when male farmers marry women from non-farm

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backgrounds who are thought not to understand this way of life. If women rebel against the self-sacrifice that is expected from them or are perceived as deviating from whatever ‘the family farm’ demands, they are seen as threatening its future. In their ethnographic study of farming families in Wales, Price and Evans identify an emerging discourse of women as ‘gold diggers’ who come in from outside agriculture, marry a farmer, and then divorce him and take half the value of the farm with them, endangering its survival. Daughters-in-law are often constructed as a potential threats to the future of the farm (Pini 2007), and one defensive strategy enacted against them is to decrease their potential claim on the farm should the marriage fail (Gray 1998). Such threats may be more imagined than real, but they reveal a pervasive fear that family farms are jeopardized by women’s more independent behaviour and the rising incidence of divorce. According to Price and Evans, women are ‘being re-imagined as a major new threat to the whole way of life’ of family farming and its patriarchal ideology and power relations (2006, 293).

The processes and consequences of family dissolution for the farm and for the adults involved remain largely unexplored. In this article we are particularly interested in the challenges encountered and the outcomes of the breakup process from women’s points of view. We focus on how they balance individual interests against those of the farm and the children’s future. The article aims to contribute to the under-researched topic of farm couple breakups and, more specifically, to elucidate women’s agency in changing or maintaining patriarchal structures and relations in agricultural communities.

### **Norwegian divorce law: Towards individualization?**

One important aspect of the northwest European family structure is the principle of marital community property (Solheim 2012). In the Norwegian Marriage Act this idea is expressed

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through the mutual provision duty, the joint property rights of the married couple and their obligation in case of divorce to share all assets created during marriage. This norm underlines the importance of the family as an economic unit and gives women without income of their own a certain economic security both within marriage and in its dissolution.

Unlike other Scandinavian countries, however, Norway modified the principle of community property by an amendment to the Marriage Act in 1991 that added the ‘unequal division of marital estate’ rule, stating that what the partners bring into the marriage they can take with them in case of divorce. The unequal division rule represents a movement towards separate estates for spouses and has been motivated by women’s increased participation in the labour market. According to Jorun Solheim (2012, 51), this shift is a manifestation of a process of individualization whereby women and men are seen as independent economic individuals.

Moreover, spouses can make written contracts (marriage settlements) in order to agree on a disposition of the property that differs from what the law would generally require. Among farmers this is sometimes done to protect the farm as a separate estate, thereby reducing the farm owner’s risk of serious financial consequences in case the relationship ends. Under the terms of these contracts, the partner who comes to the farm rather than succeeding the parents—most often the woman—does not gain any legal rights to the farm even when s/he contributes to it with work and money (Follo, Haugen and Logstein 2012).

Despite legal regulation, there is no guarantee that the law sufficiently addresses the issues that may arise in divorces of farming couples. Even though the farm’s assets may have been in one partner’s family for generations, a spouse might have contributed directly or indirectly over many years to their accumulation by investing money in the farm, by doing farm work without receiving a taxable income (and thereby failing to build any pension

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entitlements), and/or by co-signing mortgages and loan contracts. For instance, if one of the spouses owns the land and the other has contributed labour and off-farm income to the farm, the specific provisions in the Norwegian law that govern the distribution of assets and liabilities often fails to recognize this contribution. Even though the law is gender neutral, when applied it tends to discriminate women as they are much more likely to be the non-landowners. Further, the market value of the farm property might be low or be encumbered by huge debts, so the couple might have limited or no assets to distribute.

### **Individualization and connectedness**

The individualization thesis has been among the most prominent approaches for interpreting current trends in the structure and practice of families. As articulated by Giddens (1991, 1992) and developed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002), individualization theory posits the weakening power of earlier social norms and laws as regulating mechanisms of family life. This process may be described in terms of cultural liberalization, with increased emphasis on the individual, reflexivity and personal choice. Instead of doing what has always been done, each person must continuously make decisions about how to live a 'life of one's own'.

Feminist social theorists have criticized the individualization thesis because it disregards the structural conditions in which choices are made as well as the continuity of personal relations (Smart 2007). A related critique is that it underestimates the strength of mutual dependency and consideration for others (Smart and Shipman 2004; Brannen and Nilsen 2005). Smart (2007) introduces the thesis of connectedness to 'set the sociological imagination off on a different intellectual trajectory to the one initiated by the individualization thesis' (Smart 2007, 189). Instead of capturing autonomy she seeks evidence of 'connection, relationship, reciprocal emotion, entwinement, memory, history and so on'

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(p.189). Particularly for women, individualization is a contradictory process. ‘It conflicts with embodied aspects of female identity such as “being there” for others and their responsibility for care work and emotion work within families and intimate relationships’ (Charles, Davies and Harris 2008, 7). The contradiction between individualization and moral responsibility for others is at the centre of this analysis of farm couples’ breakups. We ask how women balance their self-interest and their legal right to share the farm assets against their concerns for the well-being and future of the children, for their former husband, and for the continuation of the farm.

### **Methods and data**

Research for this paper was conducted during fieldwork undertaken in 2009-2011 in a larger study of relational arrangements in Norwegian farming. The main objective of that study was to identify how farm couples organize their relationship and handle marriage and cohabitation agreements. In this paper, we draw on interviews with women to explore their experiences and perspectives.

We located the women in various ways as they were hard to find. One of our main criteria for selecting farm women who had experienced a relationship breakup was that the separation had occurred at least three years before. The respondents’ retrospective views about their experiences were probably less coloured by emotional distress, anger, or worry about their own welfare when things were more settled. The women had completed the physical, financial and legal adjustments that the breakup entailed. All but one of the interviews were conducted face to face; the other was conducted by telephone. Each interview lasted between one and a half and two hours. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. All respondents have been identified by pseudonyms to protect their privacy.



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After the breakup four of the seven women we interviewed left the farm, while three continued farming; those who left and those who stayed faced quite different dilemmas. The women ranged in age from 31 to 62; the duration of their relationships ranged from 6 to 25 years. All but one had children, and five had children living at home at the time of the breakup. Their legal property situations varied: two had pre-nuptial agreements and one had a cohabitation contract, but the other four had to negotiate the terms of the separation at the time. The rule regarding the unequal division of the marital estate applied only to one of them. The respondents came from different areas in Norway and lived in neighbourhoods with different characteristics in terms of remoteness, number of people, and type of agricultural production.

There is undoubtedly a strong element of self-selection among the women we interviewed. These women were willing to talk with researchers who were strangers to them about deeply personal and painful experiences. Some were motivated by the lack of public attention to this important issue. Moreover, their stories were told in retrospect, when they had managed to compose coherent accounts that comported with their current sense of self. These women's narratives may be seen as morally adequate accounts that give meaning to their choices. All first-person narratives 'are embedded in the cultural and ideological practices that are available in the society' in which they live, rather than entirely idiosyncratic and individual (Syltevik 2010, 450). In that sense, they speak to shared values as well as personal circumstances. Even the most personal narratives are shaped by cultural values and individuals' concern that they do not fall outside of widely accepted norms.

In analysing the material, we read the interviews several times and identified certain topics that the women themselves introduced. One major theme was their emphasis on self-respect and being able to carry on with dignity. This matter turned out not to be an isolated

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piece of information. What emerged were interconnected pieces, as in a jigsaw puzzle, in which the logic of duty and moral obligations was embedded in the logic of self-interest. The relationship between individual interests and community norms became the central question in our analysis.

The analytic process was inductive and case oriented, with an initial focus on understanding the dynamics present within individual settings. These women had different options and encountered different barriers. As their individual situations differed, so too, did the solutions they arrived at. Then we searched for patterns by means of a cross-case comparison, looking for similarities as well as differences among them. Later in the process we applied ‘individualization’ and ‘connectedness’ as heuristic devices to generate more cross-cutting findings regarding how women balanced individual interests against the relationships embedded in the family farm, which had to be reconfigured after the breakup.

### **A phase of reorganization**

Dissolving a couple relationship that is constituted by living and working on the farm together almost always entails one person leaving the farm. Four of the women we interviewed left the farm. When the operation of the farm has to be restructured, ownership of the land is a determining factor. Land that has been in one spouse’s family is never alienated from that person and his or her kinship line.

One of the first practical questions that must be dealt with is where the person who leaves the farm makes a new home. Berit and her partner had bought their farm together, so it was not taken for granted that she would be the one to leave it. She had done a wide range and substantial amount of farm work and been involved in all the strategic decisions. The process of separation lasted a whole year. In the end, she said, ‘we decided that I should move out,

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and he would take over the farming operations'. This solution did not contradict the dominant idea that 'the farmer' is the man.

Eva, who was the farmer while her husband worked off-farm, continued farming after the divorce. Her situation was different from the other women's since she and her husband each owned farm properties that originally were neighbouring farms. During their marriage, they had carefully renovated the residence on his property, which became their home. As part of the divorce settlement she let her husband have the house. She explained:

I felt very bitter about moving out, but since he had grown up in that house, I felt it was right that he continue to live in it .... No one would forgive me, neither his relatives nor others, if I kept his childhood home.

She did not take any of the furniture and equipment they had bought together, either, as she felt it 'belonged' to the house. Her original property also had a residence, so she moved to that house, which was smaller and in much worse shape. Her decision did not contradict patriarchal norms of property ownership.

Petra was educated at an agricultural college and had invested all her time and energy in working on the farm and raising four children. When negotiating divorce she faced many dilemmas. She believed that she would have been better able to cope with the emotional turmoil of the breakup if she had, as she put it 'escaped to the nearest major city. Then it would have been easier to distance it all and.... I would have gotten rid of that fellow, right'. Instead, she chose to continue living in the locality. She wanted to be considerate towards the children, so they could continue to interact with their father and take part in activities they shared with him on the farm. She was torn between what would be best for herself and her children's interests and relationship with their father, which included the possibility that one would become the farm successor.

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The fact that Norwegian farms often contain several houses helps couples find temporary solutions. Petra claimed the right to temporarily live in the farm house, and her ex-husband moved into a flat in the basement of his parents' *kårbolig* (house for retired farmers on the farm). Similarly, Dagrun continued to live in the farm's main residence for a couple of years after their breakup because she operated her own tourist business on the farm and no suitable houses were available in the neighbourhood. Her former husband moved into another building on the farm. This solution was not an obvious one, but 'I took matters into my own hands', she stated. The children remained in their original home, which Dagrun believed enabled them to make a very smooth transition, and 'they could freely walk between the two homes'. When a house finally came up for sale within the children's school district, she moved.

Five of the women had young children living at home when the breakup occurred and had to face the question of where the children should live. None had a custody fight with her former spouse. Berit and her former partner shared physical custody. When Berit moved out, she rented a house and eventually obtained a bank loan that enabled her to buy a small-holding within walking distance of the original farm, so the children went back and forth between their parents' houses.

A breakup within a farm family involves special dilemmas regarding the children's relation to the farm and the intergenerational transfer of land and agricultural knowledge. The eldest child has the right to succeed her or his parents in farming, and should she/he decide not to do so the younger ones might. If the children move away from the farm, intergenerational transmission might be jeopardized. But this consideration did not outweigh all other factors in deciding where the children would live. Petra said that both she and her husband took it for granted that the children would remain with her. 'It would have been

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unthinkable for me to leave my children,' she declared; 'it would have killed me'. She found solutions that enabled the children to continue to have frequent contact with their father and spend time on the farm. What is socially regarded as the right thing to do seems particularly important when mothers consider the care of their children.

All the women continued to live in the locality despite the fact that few adequate houses were available. They wanted to keep the children with them and at the same time maintain the children's connections to the farm. In dealing with this dilemma as they embarked on a new life of their own, they did not single-mindedly pursue their individual self-interest but, rather, tried to balance their responsibilities to themselves with those to the children and to the farm.

This pattern is all the more remarkable considering how negatively they described the very conservative local norms for what farm families ought to be and particularly what women should be allowed to do. Petra said that she was never really accepted or included by her in-laws or other villagers. She had no involvement in decision making on the farm and was deeply disappointed that her husband discussed farm matters with his father and not with her. She had been involved in a constant power struggle with her mother-in-law throughout the marriage. This situation is very similar to the perception of daughters-in-law as potential threats to the future of the farm described by Price and Evans (2006; see also Pini 2007). Petra's in-laws, who also lived on the farm, had a high standing in the local community and very determined opinions about farming and the family. During the breakup process she experienced a lack of support from other women in the community, which she interpreted as having to do with local women's inferior position on the farms and their inability to oppose patriarchal norms. Astrid summarized these norms: 'When you are married on a farm, you

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should stay there. You should consider the farm, first and foremost, and there you should stay’.

What the divorced women described are cultural norms that have been embedded in practices on family farms and rural communities for decades. As Smart (2007) has pointed out, persons cannot be extracted from their embeddedness in family history, relationships, and cultural context—in other words, their ‘webs of connectedness’. Their decisions to continue living in the community were guided by their commitment to their children’s future in relation to the farm as well as their acute awareness of these norms.

### **The farm’s future, or my own?**

When a farm couple’s relationship breaks up, a complex set of issues regarding the farm must be resolved. Sharing of assets, debt obligations, and refinancing are among the key questions that must be addressed that bear not only on the separate futures of the two parties but also on the future of the enterprise. Using a lawyer may be necessary or advisable for women to ensure that their interests are protected. Yet, these women worried that using a lawyer might escalate the conflict rather than resolve it. Although Petra had to hire a lawyer in order to get some money from the settlement, she regretted the fact that this was necessary.

You cause a conflict! You go head on with someone you know well when you use a lawyer.... You need courage, and you need to go for it, but it is nasty business. It would have been much less stressful just to withdraw, find shelter somewhere, pull the covers over my head, and lick my wounds.

Despite her sense of righteous anger, she wanted to avoid being perceived as antagonistic and ‘making things worse’.

Three of the women ended up using a lawyer in their divorce settlements. Petra’s and Dagrun’s lawyers wanted to hold a much tougher line than they did and to follow the letter of

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the law. Petra's lawyer wanted to bring the settlement before the court in order to secure her legal rights, but she was concerned that being awarded all the assets to which she was entitled would overburden her ex-husband with debt and make it impossible for him to continue farming. As Petra saw it, a forced sale of the farm would not benefit anyone—neither her nor the children or her ex-husband. The women who put a brake on their lawyers, as well as those who came to similar agreements without using lawyers, were reluctant to pursue their own self-interest at the expense of the obligations they felt to preserve the farm's viability.

The women who left the farm after the breakup all wanted to ensure that the farm could remain in operation after the settlement. Astrid, who divorced after 25 years of marriage, was in her own opinion entitled to half the value of the farm. However, she said that if she had demanded the amount she was entitled to, her former husband would not have been able to pay her without selling the farm. 'I did try to find a solution where he could continue to operate the farm'. She needed some assets in order to start her new life, but the farm was deep in debt. She did not want him to be forced to lose his occupation, his home, and the land he had taken over from his family. Her solution was that, instead of asking for a sum of money, she claimed a small piece of uncultivated land that could be used as a building lot.

Similarly, Dagrún explained that her former spouse would have been unable to make it if she had pressed her legal demands. They had made a marriage agreement that entitled her to a certain compensation for the work she contributed to the farm over the years. But she ended up with no compensation at all, simply because he would not have been able to pay. She said:

It was very important for me to know [that] if something happened with the farm some years after I left, it would have had nothing to do with me. Then I would have a very, very clear conscience and know that it was not me who had made it difficult for him.

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Dagrun made a moral choice regarding the divorce settlement: she did not want to do anything that could affect the farm's financial situation so that in a worst-case scenario he would have to sell the land. For her this was a matter of preserving her dignity as well as his.

Berit's situation was quite different from that of these three other women because she had bought and owned the farm together with her partner. By the time of the breakup there was no equity to share; in fact, she was co-responsible for a huge debt. She hoped that the settlement 'would be conducted mercifully and that the farm would be saved; that was my main concern'. Berit avoided leaving with debt even though she could have been required to pay her share; 'I could have risked having to pay to move'. The settlement required him to take over the whole debt, and as the debt was higher than the farm value there was nothing left.

So I left with break-even. I had a feeling that all my belongings had been burned up after 17 years, but I had my personal belongings, clothes and such. I could have demanded the farm if I had insisted, but he had farming as his full-time job and I had work outside the farm, so for me it was right that he continued.

Despite starting at zero, she believed in retrospect that she did fairly well. Berit balanced two considerations: she wanted the farm to be saved, but not at a continuing cost to herself, as she established a life of her own.

The three women who stayed on the farm after the breakup faced a different challenge: how could they continue farming without their 'partners in production' (O'Hara 1998)? Their partners had previously contributed to the farm work even though they held full-time jobs off the farm. How would the women handle the work load by themselves? Eva made an agreement with her ex-husband that he would help out in his spare time. At the time of our interview, Inga also relied on her former partner's assistance with farm work, which he was



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willing to provide for a transitional period. This situation could not continue, however, and Inga had already made some changes toward less intensive farming. She had begun further education and was considering leasing the farm to tenants, which was a difficult decision as the lease would last ten years. The only woman who was not dependent on her former spouse's assistance was Frida. At the time of the breakup she had already adopted a less work-intensive form of production. She gained a full-time position in the municipality, borrowed money, and paid her husband a relatively large sum of money in the divorce settlement. She aimed to keep the farm productive and within the family until their son was old enough to decide whether or not to take over.

None of these women considered selling the farm; that was simply not an option. Their concern was how to keep the farm in operation without a labour contribution from their former partner. Their breakup forced a reorientation of their plans for the future of the farm. All seven of these women considered the welfare of the family and the farm, as well as themselves, but their options and where they put the most weight differed depended on their situation.

### **Self-respect and being strong in a vulnerable situation**

These women aimed to act reasonably and decently despite the difficulties of their situation. They spoke of the need to be strong even when they felt vulnerable. Being strong had two essential dimensions: for the children's sake, and in relation to the former partner.

Berit's laconic summary was that one must try to set aside one's own problems or to 'keep one's own problems to oneself, and give the children the support, the backing, and the help that they need'. She had to try to keep an inner peace and find her own solutions. The children were her strength and gave her something to fight for; she struggled 'not just for me

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but for my children'. She felt overwhelmed by the myriad practical matters that had to be settled, 'so much paperwork and so many forms'. Yet she had to stand up for the children and be a stable part of their lives.

Petra said she realized that she had to stay strong and sensible for the children as well as for herself. At the time of the breakup she was left with no job, no money, and no house of her own. She had lost her lifework and the place where she enjoyed living and the children grew up, as well as the love she had believed in. She was emotionally distressed and grief-stricken and had many conflicts with her former husband and in-laws.

Being strong in relation to the former partner involved trying to have him leave the relationship in a decent manner—indeed, in the same manner that women tried to exemplify for themselves and their children. When they were preoccupied with the viability of the farm, it was presumably to show consideration for their former partners. But it was mostly about behaving in a way that they would be able to live with in retrospect. They sought to avoid being blamed for the failure of the farm. Petra put it like this:

I could have run him bankrupt; I could have demanded a lot more. I could have done things totally differently. But for me . . . it's like, when you feel that you are being treated so unfairly, things are so hard and things become so wrong, then it is to have the strength to handle it so that you don't have to carry it with you for the rest of your life, right? I've at least tried to settle our affairs properly. So. . . for me it is about doing this the right way and ending it in a manner that feels fairly right, so that not everything is *completely* wrong, because it sets its mark on you. That is not good.

Even though Petra had been cheated on, she decided to follow her own conscience and act more decently than she felt her husband had acted towards her. It is interesting that the women's sense of self-respect was almost entirely equivalent with what they thought that

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others in the farm community would think of their conduct. They did not seem to object to local norms as long as they weren't blatantly invidious to women.

To put themselves a bit aside and not demand everything to which they were legally entitled can be seen as an attempt to preserve their dignity and self-respect. Dagrún spoke about 'being able to live with' the economic solution she demanded and about the strength of will that was needed to 'stand up for oneself but not say anything nasty'. She talked about being able 'to carry him a little' and to 'grin and bear it'.

You in a way do what you can to ensure that he also feels that he is doing fine. You must try to behave in such a way that the children, he, and I all emerge as whole people. . . . If he is standing on his own two feet, then I and the children are better off.

Deemphasizing their own individual interests in order to preserve not only the family farm but also their own self-respect and dignity illustrates the interweaving interests and relations in family farming. It seems that the limits of the individualization theory, when applied to intimate partnerships, are especially sharp and powerful in the case of women on family farms whose relationships end.

## **Conclusions**

This article has shown how farm women balance the needs of self and others during the breakup process and handle the apparently conflicting interests of the farm and the children, and themselves. Divorce is an example of individualization and a disruption of the couple relationship that may threaten the survival of the family farm. Yet our interviews demonstrate that the breakup process does not entail radical changes, as women act so that family relationships continue and farm operations survive. Little in women's narratives resembles the behavior of self-seeking and disembedded individuals. Rather, this study illustrates that

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mutual dependency and care for others prevail. At the same time that these women sought to get out of an unsatisfactory partnership, their considerations and actions in the divorce process were strongly guided by their connection and commitment to the farm and the family. The imperative to care is a 'deeply gendered moral requirement' (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2000). In a farm family context, women's moral rationalities seem relatively unaffected by the individualization process.

Although their situations and solutions varied, all the women we interviewed took the future of the farm into consideration and seemed to rank its viability among their most important goals. None of those who moved out exercised their full legal rights given concerns that it might destroy the farm business. The women all made decisions with reference to moral and socially negotiated views about what is right and proper to do in the farm community. If the farm's survival were threatened, they would have faced considerable disapproval. Moreover, their former partner's future on the farm was connected to their children's well-being and interests. Their decisions were made with reference to the patriarchal ideology of family farming, and their moral frame of reference was the 'discourse of the family farm' (Brandth 2002). Women farmers who continued to operate the farm after the breakup faced different challenges, but their loyalty to the farm's survival was dominant. They are representatives of the new women farmers who defy the assumption that farming is a masculine occupation (Haugen 1998).

The rising divorce rate among farmers means that it has now become possible for women to make individual choices and leave a relationship. Despite the difficulties they encountered and the effort required, they manage to start a life of their own and assume a more independent position. To some extent they have withstood the pressures of familial

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ideology and rural traditions, and, to that extent, farm women have greater room for maneuver.

At the same time, their choices are embedded in local structures and cultures of care and obligations to others. Women see such concerns as part of their identities and vital to their self-respect. In order to lead a good life in the future, they need to be confident that they have not caused irreparable damage to others. In other words, they may see taking care and being considerate as in their own interest. This illustrates ‘the paradox of choice’, that when people have choices they are responsible for the consequences. Any negative consequences that may harm others would reflect back on the women, giving them a bad reputation and a troubled conscience. Conscience and reputation are indeed intertwined here. This internalization of the importance of others’ opinions of their conduct, which may be most common in small communities, may be part of the reason why they accept patriarchal values even when they are aware that they are giving up something financially. Women’s greater freedom to choose still entails taking other people’s well-being into consideration. Thus individualization and connectedness are two sides of the same coin.

In sum, although farm women who leave their relationships may be rebelling against patriarchal structures, they handle the dissolution in ways that are protective of a culture underpinned by patriarchal gender relations. Even in divorcing they are embedded in the family farm discourse and thus might reinforce patriarchal farming relations.

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