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When Farm Couples Break Up: Gendered moralities, gossip, and the fear of stigmatisation in rural communities

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Abstract

This article draws on interviews with farm women and men who have experienced family break-up to analyse their experiences of gender expectations in family farming, their fear of stigmatisation and their receipt of help from the rural community. The interviews illustrate compliance with dominant constructions of rural gendered moralities. Men struggled to live up to the ideals of rural masculinity, which centre on hard work, self-sufficiency and mental strength. Women, who were strongly influenced by the moral norms of rural womanhood, managed to retain their feminine dignity as caring and considerate of the family. Rural communities are often characterised as nurturing close relationships, but also as pervaded by social control and gossip. Both women and men

interpreted their break-up as a private matter and deliberately avoided disclosing relationship problems in order to protect themselves and their families from gossip, which made it difficult to seek and receive help from the rural community. While some of the hardships are recognisable for any divorced couple, the article is concerned with the rural/farm particularities of the divorce situation.

Introduction

This article explores how gendered norms and expectations in rural communities in contemporary Norway influence the coping strategies of men and women who experience farm family break-up. Although farmers are less likely to divorce than the population as a whole, their divorce rate is rising (Follo and Haugen 2010). Along with recent shifts in patterns of farm succession, off-farm employment, and cohabitation, the dissolution of farm couples is an indication of growing family diversity in farming as well as in the countryside.

While any divorce or break-up is stressful for the individuals involved, the break-up of a farm couple has especially severe practical and social consequences. It may threaten the economic viability of the enterprise and even challenge the normative basis of the family farm as an institution. For this reason a break-up may also have consequences for the social identity of farmers. The dominant family-farm ideology is based on patriarchal relations (Price and Evans 2006) and on the intergenerational transfer of the farm. When intergenerational continuity is under threat for socioeconomic reasons, any additional threat that arises from interpersonal problems makes it even more serious. As Little (2007, p. 853) has pointed out, heterosexual love is strongly associated

with the countryside, and the farm family is treated as ‘a model for social relations within the rural community’. The prevailing construction of the ‘good marriage,’ for instance, implies unity, companionship, and complementary gender roles (Bryant and Pini 2011, p. 80). As women’s labour power is implicitly institutionalised in the marriage contract and extended to their workplace on the farm, marital stability and permanency is important to the agricultural community. Thus, marital relationships are embedded within and regulated by the cultural practices of the community (Bryant 2013). This article explores how farm couples coped with their break-up in relation to how they perceived cultural values and gendered moral codes in rural communities.

Two contrasting images of rural communities appear in both scholarly and popular discourses. One highlights the positive values of safety, peace and quiet, and caring that are presumed to characterise social relations (Villa 1999; Short 2006); the other emphasises the conservative, repressive side of life in small, close-knit societies (Haugen and Villa 2006a) and portrays rural culture as potentially alienating for those who do not share its values (Bell 1997, 2006; Little 2007).

Notions of the rural idyll have been challenged by rural social scientists and their interests in questions of inclusion, belonging and ‘otherness’ (Cloke and Little 1997; Bryant and Pini 2011). It is through contrast with an assumed ‘other’ that is anti-idyllic that the rural idyll acquires meaning (Bell 1997; Short 2006; Bryant and Pini 2011, p. 7). Individuals and groups are ‘othered’—that is, marginalised and stigmatised—if their identity ‘fails to conform to assumptions and beliefs about the nature of rural society’ (Little 1999, p. 439). Rural society has a powerful capacity to censure those it defines as deviant (Bryant and Pini 2011, p. 8). We ask how this ambivalent view of rural social

relations relates to the experiences of divorced men and women farmers. Does a divorce among farm couples today mean that women and men feel they have failed to fulfil rural norms and values? Do they fear that others will condemn them for disregarding the dominant farm family ideology?

Gendered agricultural moral culture

Feminist scholars have long called attention to the gendered structure of rural society, which has been constituted around women's subordinate position and unpaid domestic labour (Alston 1995; Little 1997; Hughes 1997; Brandth 2002). Paradoxically, farm women have been found to comply with the patriarchal construction of the family farm and allow themselves to be exploited in order to ensure farm survival (Haugen et al. 2014; Price and Evans 2006). A study by Brandth and Haugen (2005a) found farm women's identities to be constructed around wifehood, reproduction and caring in order to ensure the continuation of the farm, local traditions and community life. Their daily work revolved around enhancing other people's wellbeing and meeting their emotional needs. The material and moral dimensions of women's family responsibilities were interwoven. Following Doucet's terminology (2006, p. 176), motherhood was a primary aspect of their 'gendered moral responsibility'. On the other hand, women have been regarded as the 'modern gender' in farming as they have taken jobs off the farm in rural villages or nearby towns (Brandth 2002; Bennett 2004; Riley 2009). Farm women today are recognised as making more independent choices and assuming increasingly visible positions both within and beyond agriculture (Haugen 1998; Riley 2009). Choosing to divorce their husbands may well be another step toward farm women's independence,

although they may sacrifice their financial interest in the farm to do so (Haugen et al. 2014).

Rural gender research has increasingly focused on the dynamic and situated character of masculinity rather than seeing it as a stable category. It has demonstrated variable ways of being a man and a farmer (Peter et al. 2000; Little 2003; Brandth and Haugen 2005b; Bartlett 2006; Campbell et al. 2006). The dominant notions of rural masculinity, however, emphasise hard work, control and domination of the land and nature: 'Real men are rural men' (Campbell et al. 2006, p. 2), 'able in body and sound in mind' (Philo 1992, p. 201). Traits such as physical strength, stamina and stoicism construct farm men's identities as powerful and worthy of esteem. The importance to men of being a successful farmer and head of a family makes failure shameful (Bryant and Garnham 2014). As the agrarian definition of masculine success values family life, partnership and continuity on the land (Bartlett 2006, p. 48) a family break-up may be deeply felt as a blow to masculine identity of farmers. Research has demonstrated that the idealised character of rural masculinity tends to undermine men's mental health (Parr et al. 2004) and silence their emotional distress (Coen et al. 2013). The threat of status loss or the felt inability to act in line with the hegemonic ideals of masculinity can result in depression (Valkonen and Hänninen 2012). In other words, the power of masculinity in its traditional or 'monologic' form (Peter et al. 2000) tends to downgrade men who do not fulfil its ideals.

One question in this article is what a farm break-up demonstrates about rural gender norms and the efforts of men and women to measure up to the expectations of gendered agricultural moralities.

Informal social regulation

The positive conception of rurality is closely linked with the high degree of familiarity among people who live in a small place (Clove 2006). Here, it must be presumed, ‘everybody’ knows what is going on. This characteristic of small communities has a downside, as transparency enables social control. Generally speaking, social control refers to processes that regulate individual behaviour, leading to conformity and compliance with prevailing norms. Particularly when mainstream norms are being challenged or people’s actions deviate from them, social control mechanisms are activated.

Gossip and the fear it instils is a powerful form of social control in rural communities. Gossip has been defined as informal and evaluative talk about a person who is not present among people who are familiar with each other and share a common frame of reference (Wert and Salovey 2004, p. 122). It enforces the boundaries of the group and is employed to censure the actions of people who are crossing them (Rosnow 2001). In Norwegian scholarship, the norm of keeping everybody in their proper place has been termed ‘the village beast’ (see Brandth et al. 2013). Gossip may be positive as well as negative. Positive gossip, such as praise or defence offered by others, may become a source of social support (Ellwardt et al. 2012). Negative gossip may cause stigmatisation or even victimisation. Any breach of norms is likely to result in gossip. In their study of young people in the countryside, Haugen and Villa (2006b) found that girls were more vulnerable than boys to rumours and, in addition, were monitored more closely, leading them to exercise special caution to avoid risking their reputations. In

order to reduce their exposure to gossip, people try to hide salient details about their private life (Foster 2004). One of our concerns in this article is to explore how divorced farmers guarded their privacy and sought to avoid becoming subject to gossip and stigmatisation in a small, tightly knit community.

In sociology the term ‘community’ has been associated with a particular form of social organisation based on small, face-to-face groups centred on rural villages and neighbourhoods and contrasted with the anonymous individualism of urban society. The idea that rural social cohesion is supportive is too simplistic, however, as it also positions some people as ‘out of place’ (Coen et al. 2013; Cresswell 1996). Moreover, relationships among neighbours are quite diverse and vary, not as a function of community characteristics, but with individuals’ actions and choices. Neighbours are not necessarily ‘either “busybodies” or distance-keeping “nobodies”’ (Crow et al. 2002, p.128). In comparing rural and urban neighbourhoods, Parr et al. (2004, p. 412) found that people’s sense of social obligation may be intensified and less easy to ignore in remote places.

Generally speaking, divorce is often regarded as a matter of individual choice and shrouded in privacy; unlike illness, deaths and accidents, it might not readily mobilise local support. A precondition for support is that local people know that a person is in need and want to get involved (Crow et al. 2002). To what degree did these preconditions exist as far as farm couples’ breakups are concerned? Did men and women receive supportive responses from their rural neighbours?

The analysis proceeds as follows: First, given the gendered meanings associated with rurality, we compare how men and women experienced the break-up process. Then we show how divorced farmers coped with the risk of gossip and the moral code they

have presumably violated by breaking up. Lastly, we consider how farmers who divorced perceived the support they were—or were not—offered by their neighbours.

Method and data

Research for this article was conducted during fieldwork undertaken from 2009 to 2011 for a study of relational arrangements in Norwegian farming. The main objective of the project was to identify how farm couples organise their relationship, handle issues regarding marriage and cohabitation agreements, and settle matters when they have divorced or broken up. Participants were drawn from different regions of Norway and lived in neighbourhoods with differing characteristics in terms of population density, agricultural production and economic importance, remoteness, and local labour markets. In addition to collecting statistical data and legal documents, twenty-five farm women and men were interviewed, among them eleven who had experienced a break-up.

Respondents were identified through a variety of methods, including appeals for participants made through the media and the professional and personal networks of the project team. Inevitably, an element of self-selection was at work. Since we did not speak to both parties involved in the break-up, we heard only one side of the couple's story. The fact that 'accounts are embedded in the cultural and ideological practices that are available in the society' where people reside (Syltevik 2010, p. 450) means that what our respondents said indicates as much about their perceptions of local social norms as it does about the support that was available from their local networks.

As one of the main concern of the project was how farm couples settled the matters that divorce entails, we sought respondents whose separation had occurred at

least three years before our interviews. Moreover, we were interested in the process of establishing a new life, not in the causes of the break-up or any ongoing conflict. All of the interviews except one were conducted face to face (the other was conducted by telephone). Each lasted between one and a half and two hours and was recorded and transcribed. In order to maintain the anonymity and privacy of participants, all are identified by pseudonyms. In this exploratory article, we draw from interviews with seven women and four men (see Table 1).

[Put Table 1 about here]

After the break-up, those who stayed on the farm strove to continue the operation, while those who left the farm sought to establish a new home in the same locality. Accordingly, the former partners faced different challenges and need different kinds of help. The majority of those leaving the farm already had off-farm employment, and they did not leave the locality entirely.

Five of the women was married and two cohabiting when they split up. Following the break-up, four women left the farm while three continued farming. Significantly, all three of the women who stayed had owned all or part of the land the couple farmed. Since it is still more common for couples to live on land that comes from the man's family, women are more likely than men to leave the farm after a divorce. Thus, the women we interviewed are somewhat atypical. They may, however, represent future trends as eldest daughters become successors and more women enter farming independently (Haugen 1990). All but one of the men we interviewed continued to operate the farm after the separation; the one who left continued his work as a carpenter.

Gendered responses to moral cultures

How did the men we interviewed relate to the moral code of family farming and masculinity in a situation of divorce? With the exception of the non-farmer carpenter, the men seemed unprepared for the divorce and experienced their wife's decision to leave as a shock. 'Like most divorced men, we don't understand why they leave, do we?' said Geir. Becoming single, they felt unsuccessful when it came to living up to the expectations of husbands as heads of the family farm, as earlier generations of farm men had done. They had to deal with both the loss of their farm partnership and emotional distress. Being unable to fulfil the ideals of rural masculinity, they lost motivation, and their emotional responses reduced their capacity to take care of the farm.

John, who was a full-time farmer while his wife was employed in the public sector, had managed the farm work for more than 20 years when his wife decided to leave the relationship. Over the years, he had developed a modern pork operation, but after she left he lost interest in it: 'I didn't give a damn whether the piglets died. Why should I bother?' Without knowing anything about John's personal situation, the veterinarian criticised his neglect and warned him: 'This will go to hell; you have to pull yourself together! I told you so last time I was here, too'. Ironically, a friend of John who had been in a similar situation had committed suicide. According to John, 'this was why I thought, damn, I have to pull myself together! It made me understand the seriousness of it'.

If John had not had a son who was interested in eventually taking over the farm, he told us, he would have quit farming and taken another job. Nevertheless, in order to enable his son to succeed him, he pulled himself together and continued to invest in the

operation. The break-up reduced his motivation and diminished the meaning of his daily toil, but his fear of depriving his son of a future on the farm prompted him to continue. If he had failed, he would have lost both his reputation as a 'good' farmer and his masculine honour.

Geir was running a large dairy farm in a small community where farming and forestry had long been the basis of the economy, but today most residents work in a nearby town. Geir was a hardworking man, and he had expanded his operation by buying two additional farms and leasing neighbouring land. According to Geir, his wife had never been able to adapt to life on the farm; she held an off-farm job and did not participate in farm work. Geir experienced significant distress and personal problems following their divorce. He had insomnia and could no longer manage the practical work in the barn. He explained: 'It started with me not managing to take care of the animals. I skipped milking sometimes, the cleaning was inadequate, and some of the calves died'. Other animals had to be slaughtered.

Harald, too, encountered severe emotional problems after the divorce. He and his former wife were both full-time farmers and ran a dairy farm in addition to a pork operation. After 20 years of marriage, his wife wanted a divorce. He tried to be tough and manage well even though he was deeply distressed.

I became depressed. (...) I forced myself to get up . . . forced, forced! I went to see the doctor; he prescribed anti-depressants and conversational therapy. My brothers and sisters became very worried. They feared that I . . . was suicidal. I

didn't say so, but this was what they feared. (...) And, I did think a lot about it; had the plans ready.

His thoughts about ending his life suggest that his subjective sense of self-worth had been damaged. He struggled hard to manage the farm: 'I tried to force myself to go out to do simple work, but it was terrible! The worst thing you can do when you are depressed is to lie down.'

These three men felt that the divorce represented their failure as husbands. If in consequence they did not manage to stay physically and mentally fit in order to manage the farm work, they also risked the loss of status that came from forfeiting their position as mentally strong and hard-working farmers. In this way the divorce and their emotional reaction to it conflicted with the cultural values of rural masculinity.

Turning to the women, we find different stories. They, too, felt emotional turmoil and sorrow but, in contrast to the divorced men, none recounted serious depression and inability to manage daily life. Rather, they reported vigour and decisiveness. Dagrun said: 'It was tough to leave the farm you love. I loved the mornings sitting on the porch with my coffee admiring the view and seeing the hens tripping by. But, you must decide not to be sentimental'. Petra said: 'Even if it was like hell, I decided to manage! I was determined to face the problems, not avoid them. (...) I understood that I had to do what had to be done all by myself'. Her estranged husband refused to become engaged in the financial settlement process: 'Put simply, he neither said anything nor did anything'. The women felt they had to be strong, as their ex-husbands just 'laid down on the couch' and became incapable of action.

The women did not become paralyzed but rather solution-oriented and concerned to sort things out and settle their affairs. It was necessary for them to reorient their lives and find a new house, a job, and practical solutions for the children. Their focus was on how to take care of the farm, the family, and themselves in the break-up situation (Haugen et al. 2014). This response is in line with the expectation that women will take care of other people's wellbeing (Doucet 2006). Eva said that it was her concern for the children and the need to be strong for them that kept her going. One of the women told a story about a woman in her village who had just left her farm husband and their children; the fact that she left her children behind was particularly shocking. For the women we interviewed, acting in accordance with ideals of appropriate femininity and mothering seemed to constitute the basis for their self-worth. They felt strongly that decisions that might be considered egoistic and harmful to others would reflect back on themselves, giving them a bad reputation and a troubled conscience. Dagrun explained: '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.' She continued:

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.

In this way, Dagrun made a moral choice regarding the divorce settlement: she did not want to do anything that could affect the farm negatively. For her this was a matter of

preserving her ex-husband's dignity as well as her own. Astrid said that avoiding harm to the farm was paramount when women left: 'I believe it is because of the strong norm stating that when you are married on a farm, you should stay there. One takes the farm into consideration first of all, and there one should stay!' It is very much embedded in their minds that the farm must be safeguarded even after a divorce.

We believe this divergence between men and women must be understood in terms of the prevailing definitions of masculinity and femininity in rural society. Hegemonic masculine ideals define farm men as the patriarchal heads of farming families. Losing their wife undermines their sense of self, jeopardises their position, and may result in a loss of meaning in their life, all of which make them vulnerable to situational depression (see Coen et al. 2013). Women suffered too, but they showed mental strength and maintained the capacity to act. Their ability to handle the situation may reflect the fact that most of them initiated the break-up, but also that they took care not to violate the moral obligations of motherhood.

Risk of gossip and avoidance strategies

John was particularly hurt and humiliated because his wife had met a new man whom she preferred to him. He felt that the whole village had known about this affair months before he did and was laughing at him behind his back, which made him socially anxious. He avoided meeting other people, inventing excuses for not practicing with the brass band he belonged to, and he went shopping at the local food store just five minutes before closing time. He felt that there was no place he could go without being seen as the victim of betrayal. This relates to an important characteristic of rural communities where there

might be few meeting places and where people are expected to relate to each other when they meet. In John's case, the rural village became part of the problem he had to handle, not part of the solution. He coped by applying what Crow et al. (2002) have termed 'distancing mechanisms', avoiding places where he might encounter neighbours. He also set boundaries around permissible topics of conversation. John did not involve anybody in his problems. He refrained from talking about his divorce with his friends, neighbours, or other farmers: 'This is not something you talk to your pals about', he said categorically.

Astrid told us that many people in her community were shocked when they learned about her divorce 'because I had never told anyone how it was between us'. She also expressed reluctance to discuss her situation in the interview; although we promised complete anonymity, she was anxious to make sure that some of the details she told us 'must not be printed,' or else 'the whole rural community would know who it is'. Dagrun, too, was very selective regarding whom she talked with about her marital difficulties and divorce, so the details of the break-up and settlement remained unknown to the community. From earlier experiences she knew that stories about what was going on at a large farm like theirs were interesting to people in the small village. She was of the opinion that telling too much to local residents risked 'keeping cheap talk going for 20 years or so'. Consequently, she worked hard to keep most of the details about the divorce inside the family.

Eva, who was the only woman we interviewed who did not initiate the break-up, lived in a small community with only a few other farms and very few inhabitants. She told us that she had always felt like an outsider because she had bought the farm and

moved there as a young single woman. She characterised herself as more outspoken than others in the village, but when it came to telling the locals about their marital problems Eva and her ex-husband decided to keep everything private. She was particularly concerned to guard their children against gossip and rumours. 'I thought that the children should be spared. The oldest was to have her confirmation and had just changed to a larger school, and I didn't want them to have this to worry about. (...) In this local community people are very conservative.' Only when the divorce was settled some years later did they inform their neighbours about their separation. Then they decided to tell 'everything' about their difficulties in order to avoid speculation. Eva claimed that there had 'always been gossip about me'; 'they deny it, but when information that couldn't be known without gossiping comes back to me, then I know that they talk'. She continued:

It has always been like this. You can't come into a small community like this and be one of them. That's not possible. You are an outsider. You are different, and I notice that I am actually very different from the ones who were born here and belong here. I think differently, I feel differently and I act differently.

Petra also pointed to her experiences as a newcomer to the local community many years ago. Unlike the urban areas where she had lived previously, the rural village had very conservative norms regarding farm families, and particularly women's conduct. Petra felt that she had never really been accepted by the villagers or even by her in-laws. A key dimension in 'othering' is the presence of a perceived threat to secure identities (Sibley 1995). When she moved there, she represented something different, with her self-

confidence, agricultural education, long blond hair, and red painted fingernails. She had a very outgoing personality and, as she admitted, she talked too much relative to what villagers were used to. Eva and Petra's description of their felt outsider identity is interesting. It indicates that the rural community has certain expectations about how to be a 'proper' farm woman, and that rural women, representing something different, contribute to a variation in rural femininity. In the break-up situation the interviewed women do, however, keep up the ideal of motherhood and continue to care for the family.

Olav, the only man in our sample who wanted a divorce, explained that he and his ex-wife did not inform anyone in their local community about their marital problems. His wife was particularly determined to spare their children from gossip and rumours. 'We did not discuss with anyone else before the decision was made. And, when we informed others that we had separated, it was just like a bomb; they hadn't expected it, although a small place like this is very transparent'. After the divorce was finalised, Olav did not discuss his situation with the neighbours: 'You do not talk about everything to the locals.' This way, he wanted to avoid having the details of his divorce circulate in the community.

In sum, we have seen that women and men alike comply with local norms and keep details private simply because they fear reputation-damaging gossip. In all these different localities, marital problems, separation and divorce are considered private matters and not problems to be shared with or even communicated to friends and neighbours. Although this might be the case for divorced couples in general, rural norms seem to enforce silence about farm couples' break-ups even though farm family break-

ups are becoming increasingly common. Rumours and gossip can be particularly hard to handle in small communities.

Local support: balancing respect for privacy with concern

As family problems and difficulties related to the break-up were kept silent at the same time that help was much needed, how did men and women experience local support? Farmers who divorce may find themselves in different situations, therefore we look first at those who remained on the farm and second at those who left.

The farm stayers

John stayed on the farm. To protect himself against talk he tried to hide his depression and his inability to cope with the work. Consequently, he did not receive any practical help or emotional support. The only person he eventually talked with was his sister. She persuaded him to see the doctor and, as a result, he was put on sick leave for several months. Similarly, Geir told no one about his problems and had no one to support him during his most difficult period. He acknowledged: 'I am to blame a bit myself . . . because I am not the type of guy who tells a lot about myself and what is wrong. It does not show on my outside.' He tried to handle the depression by himself, and his condition waxed and waned for three years. In both these cases, men's emotional problems connected to the divorce turned into difficulties in managing the work. Most of John's and Geir's friends were surprised when they eventually discovered the severity of their problems. Neither of the men asked for help, so they did not receive any assistance from friends or neighbours.

Harald's story is somewhat different. When it finally became known that he had fallen into a severe depression, his local network chipped in and gave him much-needed assistance with the farm work. He said:

Then the “whole world” wanted to come. I got a relief worker, and then neighbours and friends arrived—or my pals—they all came to help out. A couple of farmers, they came and mucked out the cow shed for me, and they harvested and everything. That was very nice.

This illustrates that when the need for help is communicated, assistance is forthcoming.

When the threat to masculine identity and self-respect entailed in a break-up makes men particularly vulnerable, it may be difficult to speak openly about their problems. Today, Harald uses his experiences to advocate greater openness about men's depression. It may be easier to provide practical help with the farm work, however, than assistance with emotional problems. These men's stories indicate that in the case of family break-up privacy is highly valued, and locals need to strike a balance between being supportive and being perceived as intrusive or nosy.

The three women farmers who continued to operate the farm after their break-up told very different stories from the men. Two kept livestock and had depended on their partner's help before the break-up. During and after their separation, it was not neighbours and friends who helped them with the practical farm work; strikingly, their former partners continued to work with them. Eva let her ex-husband keep the farmhouse

and moved to another dwelling close by. In return, as part of the divorce settlement, he promised to help her with the farm work. She explained:

We made a simple and fair agreement. . . . I just said that 'I won't keep anything else but my personal belongings, if you continue to help me so I am able to continue farming'. And he agreed to do that, but only until I reach retirement age [five to ten years later].

More than two years after Inga and her partner had broken up, he was still living on the farm and assisting her with the work, and they had not informed their neighbours that their romantic relationship had ended. They agreed that this transitional period should last for three years, and then she would have to make a decision about what to do in order to continue the farm operation. Her former partner argued that they should re-establish their relationship because of the farm, but according to Inga this was not an option. The third woman who continued to live and work on the farm, Frida, was a horticulturist. Although her former partner had participated in farm work when they were a couple, she was able to keep up the operation herself. Her strategy was to make adjustments in production. Frida gave no indication that she needed or had received practical help from her neighbours.

Women and men managed the need for practical help to keep the farm running very differently. While men were extremely reluctant to ask for help and received it only when a farm crisis had made their problems clear to others, two of the three women who were determined to continue farming realised that they needed help from their former

partners for a transitional period. In their study of a resource-based rural community in northern Canada, Coen et al. (2013) found that there was stigma associated with men asking for help. Mental health problems were muted, and there were strong barriers to seeking help for depression. Unlike men, women feel no loss of self-respect in asking for assistance from others. A more basic explanation of the differing experiences of these women and men lies in the fact that in most cases it was the woman who wanted to end the relationship. They might have been better prepared emotionally for the situation than the men, for whom the break-up seemed to come out of nowhere.

The farm leavers

Four of the five respondents who left the farm were women. The only man who left, Olav, worked primarily as a carpenter, experienced few challenges after the divorce, and continued to help his former wife, the farmer, when needed. The women who left farming experienced different types of difficulties from those who stayed.

Petra felt that she had little local support when leaving the farm. Reflecting on the difference between her experience of the break-up and her husband's, she said that 'it is he who owns the farm who gets the greatest support. When I moved from the farm, it was like I had never lived in the community, right. . . There is no sisterly solidarity in this place'. However, she spoke about being backed by some local farm women whom she described as 'different' because they were 'resourceful, independent and owned their own properties'. She interpreted the lack of other support as the result of farm women's inferior position, which she attributed to their not having shared or sole ownership of the

property. According to Petra, her situation caused some panic among other women in the village, who started thinking about their own rights in case of divorce.

Berit and her former partner had purchased the farm together, but they decided that she should leave the farm since he was a full-time farmer and she was not. Berit received little local support when she divorced. She believed that people in the community saw her as something of a curiosity because she defied the dominant norms of rural womanhood, which placed her on the margins of the community she had a stake in belonging to.

I mingle in a men's world. I have opinions about farming and forestry, and I am seen as a threat among women because I am not engaged in making curtains and similar traditional feminine interests, and then they are afraid that I will steal their husbands. I do not understand this.

As seen above, many of the women we interviewed, whether they stayed on or left the farm, described themselves in terms of 'otherness'. They seemed to feel marginal, that they were 'strangers', and that when they challenged traditional norms by leaving their partners they were ostracised.

None of the women who left the farm turned to people in the neighbourhood for help or support. They protected their privacy by means of distancing mechanisms and, at the same time, they were influenced by their sense that neighbours did not want to intrude. Moreover, both partners often continued to live in the same community after the break-up, and people in the village, who were accustomed to relating to them as a couple,

might find it difficult to act towards them as single individuals. They might also find it difficult to support one person and not the other; they might prefer to remain neutral and maintain good, albeit rather distant, relationships with both.

Concluding discussion

This article has been concerned to explore what a break-up situation in family farming can illustrate about certain aspects of the rural. The analysis is based on a limited number of interviews. Nevertheless, it has demonstrated interesting differences between men and women when it comes to the possibility to live up to expectations of rural gendered moralities. Divorce seems to provoke greater challenges to masculine self-identity. For farm men the farm work is a crucial element of their identity. As a rural business with livestock demands care every day, it forces them to put energy into an aspect of their masculinity that confronts them with the possibility of failure and spoilt identity as 'good' farmers. They had to deal with the farm work in a difficult situation without disclosing their emotional distress. They did not allow themselves to show signs of weakness, so their problems became quite severe before they sought help. That masculine gender norms affect men's depression and its manifestations is documented in the literature (Valkonen and Hänninen 2012; Coen et al. 2013). Rural 'monologic' masculinity, according to Peter et al. (2000), 'limits the range of topics deemed appropriate to discuss, mandates a specific definition of work and success, and sets precise boundaries of manhood'.

Contrary to our expectations, considering farm women's subordinate position, women showed greater decisiveness in the divorce situation. Women kept up the aspect

of femininity valued the most, namely the ideal of motherhood, and they continued to care for the children, the family and even the existence of the farm (see also Haugen et al. 2014). In this way, they combined strength and energetic action, which are often associated with masculinity, with the presumed feminine qualities of care and consideration for others. Some of the women already described their identity as being different from the dominant norms of rural femininity so the break-up confirmed this identity.

Before conducting this research, the ambivalent notions of rurality described in the literature made us curious if a family farm break-up would mobilize help and support, or rather disapproval and stigmatisation. The interviews showed that farm couples often withheld information about their break-up from others and that in many cases they deliberately refrained from seeking help. This finding resonates with that of other researchers, who have shown that disclosure of personal problems and erosion of privacy facilitates gossip, leads to stigma, and positions people as 'out of place' (Coen et al. 2013; Parr and Philo 2003). Women and especially men kept quiet and adopted distancing mechanisms, either limiting social interactions or setting boundaries on the topics of conversation when they met others. In our material separation and divorce seemed to be interpreted as private problems and personal failures rather than as farm problems. Men and women alike wanted to protect themselves and their children against the invisible, evaluative talk that circulates in the form of rumours. Their awareness of gossip made it difficult for them to disclose problems and receive help and support during relationship break-ups. These experiences could probably be reported for any divorced couple, but they seem intensified in a small community where collective norms of

conformity are stronger, anonymity less, and the inhabitants are more dependent on interacting with each other.

At the same time it seems that close, supportive local networks could be relied upon when people actively sought assistance. The divorced male farmers received practical help from local people when the break-up precipitated a farm crisis and threatened the wellbeing of the animals or the farm's economic viability. Women more often sought out practical assistance, but only from their ex-husbands.

Women and men reported different problems and needs depending on whether they stayed on or left the farm. The ambiguous consequences of the closeness and transparency of rural social relations make individuals in difficulty perceive others' responses to their situation as simultaneously supportive and damaging. This ambiguity illustrates 'the rural paradox' (Parr et al. 2004) that social cohesion may actually 'operate inversely to its assumed benefits' (Coen et al. 2013).

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Table 1: Overview of informants

	Sex	Age	Duration of relationship (years)	Formerly married (M) or cohabiting (C)	Children	Ownership of farm	Moved from the farm after the breakup
Astrid	F	50s	25	M	Yes	His	Yes
Berit	F	50s	17	C	Yes	Both	Yes
Dagrun	F	40s	18	M	Yes	His	Yes
Eva	F	60s	25	M	Yes	Both	No
Frida	F	40s	16	M	Yes	Hers	No
Inga	F	30s	6	C	No	Hers	No
Petra	F	40s	17	M	Yes	His	Yes
Geir	M	40s	10	M	Yes	His	No
Harald	M	50s	20	M	Yes	His	No
John	M	40s	21	M	Yes	His	No
Olav	M	50s	25	M	Yes	Both	Yes