

The Farmer gets a wife: hidden labour in farming households.

Farming is a critical sector within rural economies (Phelan and Sharpley, 2012) but is uncertain and risky for those reliant upon it (Turner et al, 2003). The majority of UK farms are small family farms (Morell and Brandth, 2007) where a considerable share of household income is derived from farming, labour is provided by the family and the family lives on the farm (Calus and Van Huylbroeck, 2010) compounding the impact of economic uncertainty. Previous research has focused on the Farmer as the “person responsible for the administration of the business” (Clark, 2009:219) when seeking to understanding work undertaken in these enterprises and the skills necessary for success. This paper seeks to broaden our understanding of farm work by investigating the hidden enabling work undertaken by the wider farming household. Using case-study methodology (Yin, 2009) analysis is based on observations and interviews with members of 8 households within the Scottish farming community. Extending extant work exploring the gendered nature of farming (Riley, 2009) it finds that farmers’ spouses and children play important roles in the diversified businesses that characterise contemporary farming. The unmeasured and unpaid nature of the farming household’s work allows farms to retain financial viability which external paid labour would destroy. It finds farmers’ spouses providing labour of high economic value and displaying skills such as entrepreneurial drive, opportunity identification and business management which are instrumental to successful business outcomes in contemporary family farm businesses.