

Challenges of gender equality in family farm ownership: the case of joint farm ownership by married couples in Austria

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Abstract – The aim of this research is to examine the cultural norms and normative expectations that continue to create barriers to women's ownership of farmland—even in Austria, one of the leading countries in Europe in terms of women's involvement in farm management—and to suggest possible ways to overcome such barriers. In Austria, most farm management entities are family farms that are passed down patrilineally from generation to generation. As these farms are generally small, Austrian law prohibits, as far as possible, the division of a farm on inheritance. If the heir is married, the couple can jointly inherit the farm. Austrian family farms are mainly jointly owned by married couples who have inherited them. According to semi-structured interviews with fourteen “active female farmers” selected by snowball sampling in Upper and Lower Austria, where the proportion of farms co-owned by married couples is high, wives of successors still face barriers to taking over farms. To become co-owners with their husbands, the wives acquired the professional qualifications necessary to apply for funds to finance investments in the farm and contribute to its management. The husbands of the female heirs, on the other hand, could be co-owners regardless of whether they had agricultural qualifications. Vocational education and training in the agricultural sector that is available to women is expected to be a means of achieving gender equality in the ownership of family farms.

Keywords: female farm managers / joint farm ownership / farm transfer / Austrian family farming / gender inequality

Résumé – Les défis de l'égalité des sexes dans la propriété des exploitations familiales : cas des exploitations en copropriété au sein des couples mariés en Autriche. Cette recherche examine les normes culturelles et les attentes normatives qui constituent encore des obstacles à l'accès des femmes à la propriété agricole—même en Autriche, l'un des pays européens les plus avancés en matière d'implication des femmes dans la gestion agricole—et propose des pistes pour surmonter ces obstacles. En Autriche, la plupart des entités de gestion agricole sont des exploitations familiales transmises de génération en génération de manière patrilinéaire. Ces exploitations étant généralement de petite taille, la loi autrichienne interdit autant que possible leur division lors des successions. Si l'héritier est marié, le couple peut hériter conjointement de l'exploitation. Les exploitations familiales autrichiennes sont ainsi principalement détenues en copropriété par des couples mariés héritiers. Selon des entretiens semi-structurés menés auprès de quatorze « agricultrices actives », sélectionnées par échantillonnage boule de neige en Haute et Basse-Autriche — où la proportion d'exploitations détenues conjointement par des couples mariés est élevée — les épouses des héritiers continuent de se heurter à des obstacles pour la reprise des exploitations. Afin de devenir copropriétaires avec leur mari, ces épouses ont dû acquérir les qualifications professionnelles nécessaires pour pouvoir demander des financements destinés aux investissements agricoles et pour contribuer à la gestion des exploitations. Les maris des héritières pouvaient, en revanche, devenir copropriétaires même sans qualifications agricoles. Les formations professionnelles agricoles accessibles aux femmes sont considérées comme un moyen potentiel de promouvoir l'égalité des sexes dans la propriété des exploitations agricoles familiales.

Mots-clés : femmes gestionnaires de ferme / copropriété des fermes / transmission des fermes / agriculture familiale autrichienne / inégalité des sexes.

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1 Introduction

Gender equality appears as the fifth item in the United Nations' list of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) specifies two indicators related to achieving gender equality. These indicators, which are mostly relevant to developing countries, focus on achieving gender parity in land ownership and securing rights to agricultural land, as well as supporting the revision of legal agendas to ensure women's legal capacity to own and/or manage land (FAO, 2018).

In Europe, gender equality policies have been significantly developed, and there are no legal barriers to women owning land, but cultural norms and normative expectations mean that gender equality in terms of the ownership and secure tenure of agricultural land is far from being achieved (Shortall and Marangudakis, 2022).

Reliable sex-disaggregated data on farmland are essential for monitoring progress toward gender equality in agriculture and land tenure. According to the 2020 European Union Farm Structure Survey (FSS), female farm managers account for 31.6% of the total number of farms in the EU-27, but the proportion of female farm managers varies considerably across member states. Lithuania (44.9%) and Latvia (44.8%) have the highest proportions, followed by Romania (37.3%), Austria (35.3%), Poland (34.4%), Greece (32.2%), and Italy (31.5%). In other member states, the figures are below the EU average, with notably low rates reported in market-oriented agricultural countries such as the Netherlands (5.6%), Germany (10.8%), and Denmark (10.9%) (Fanelli, 2022).

Farm managers are often also farm owners, but this is not always the case. While both roles are important elements of land rights, they are distinct. Farm managers are responsible for the administration of farmland but may not be its legal owners. In contrast, farm owners hold legal ownership of the land and typically have the rights to sell, bequeath, or lease it (FAO, 2017). However, the FSS reports do not include sex-disaggregated data on farm ownership (Burchfield *et al.*, 2024), as some EU Member States restrict the disclosure of detailed data on land ownership due to data protection laws.

In the EU, family farming is dominant, and family farm succession plays an important role in women's access to farmland and farms. Other options, such as taking over a farm outside the family or starting a new agricultural business, are more difficult due to the high capital requirements in the agricultural sector (von Davier *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, this study examines progress toward gender equality in agriculture and land tenure through a case study of farm succession in Austria. Austria is one of the leading countries in Europe in terms of women's involvement in farm management and has the highest proportion of female farm managers among EU countries, outside the former communist countries of Eastern Europe.

2 Research questions

In Austria, which is located in the alpine mountains of Central Europe, most agricultural management entities are family farms (93%) (BML, 2024) that have traditionally been passed down from father to son (Otomo and Oedl-Wieser, 2009).

Austria's farm size is relatively small on average (23.6 ha average farm size in 2020) among EU countries and is characterized by a high proportion of part-time farmers (57% in 2020). Female farmers generally get engaged in farming after marrying a farm successor, and due to the gender-based division of labor on the farms, they have often utilized their domestic skills traditionally associated with women in managing the side lines of pluriactivity endeavors, such as processing and selling agricultural products and operating agritourism on the farm (Oedl-Wieser, 2020). If the partner becomes a full-time off-farm employee, women often take over farm management by law due to social and pension insurance (Oedl-Wieser and Wiesinger, 2010). While this trend is partly driven by these insurance requirements, it demonstrates that women have a significant influence on agriculture in Austria.

According to an Austrian-wide survey on farm succession in 2018, only 19.6% of farm managers plan to have their daughters succeed them (Larcher and Vogel, 2019). In Austria, the Working Group of Female Farmers (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Österreichische Bäuerinnen*) of the Chamber of Agriculture, an interest group representing farmers, has conducted "Survey on the Working and Living Situation of Female Farmers" every ten years since 1976, and the results of the fifth nationwide sample survey in 2016 ($n = 2200$) clarified the farmland ownership status of "active female farmers" (namely, women in the stage after succeeding to a farm but before transferring it to the next generation) as 51% "owned jointly by the husband and wife," 31% "owned exclusively by the husband," and 13% "owned exclusively by the wife" (Mayr *et al.*, 2017). This indicates that Austrian family farms have mainly been jointly owned by married couples and that farms have been transferred from paternal or maternal family lines.

In Germany, according to the 2020 agricultural census, men own 90% of farmland, and only 18% of farmers designate their daughters as successors. This reflects patrilineal succession, in which farms are generally passed from father to son. Besides, according to a nationwide survey on the living conditions of female farmers from 2019 to 2022, only 10.6% of female farmers own the entire farm, 24.2% own part of the land or buildings, and 65% own nothing (von Davier *et al.*, 2023).

These results demonstrate that the custom of farms being passed down from fathers to their sons remains deeply rooted in both Austria and Germany, with only about 10% of farms owned by women exclusively and about 20% planned to be passed on to daughters. However, while 65% of female farmers in Germany do not own a farm (von Davier *et al.*, 2023), 64% of "active female farmers" in Austria (co-)own a farm (Mayr *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, the prevalence of joint farm ownership by husbands and wives, as well as the high rate of female farm ownership, are distinctive characteristics of family farming in Austria.

This study aims to conduct a case study on the farm transfer process of joint farm ownership between husbands and wives, a characteristic of family farming in Austria, in order to (1) clarify the cultural norms and normative expectations that continue to act as barriers to women's farm ownership, even in Europe, where gender equality policies have made significant progress and there are no legal barriers to women's land ownership; and (2) suggest ways to overcome these barriers.

3 Research methods

In August 2019, in cooperation with the Working Group of Female Farmers of the Chamber of Agriculture, we conducted interviews with legal experts for female farmers in the Chambers of Agriculture of Upper and Lower Austria, where the share of co-ownership of farms by married couples is high, and obtained literature on the position of women in the farm transfer process. Based on this literature, *i.e.*, a brochure on farm transfers/successions published by the Young Farmers Association (Landjugend Österreich, 2024) and a legal brochure for female farmers published by the Working Group of Female Farmers of the Chamber of Agriculture (Österreichische Bäuerinnen, 2023), we first identified the processes and challenges for female farmers inheriting farms or gaining co-ownership of farms.

Next, semi-structured interviews with 14 “active female farmers” were conducted in Upper and Lower Austria between March and May 2022. The term “active female farmers” denotes women who are actively involved in the management of a farm and can report on their personal experience of handing over or taking on a farm.

Through assistance from experts at the Chamber of Agriculture and others, interviewees were selected by snowball sampling. Twelve farm women were interviewed face-to-face on their farms, and two interviews were conducted online. Interviewees were asked about their experiences with farm transfers from previous generations and about the prospects of transferring their farms to the next generation. The questionnaire covers farm succession up to the grandparent generation of the female farmer and her spouse. Further data were obtained by asking questions about the farm, the household members, and work allocation in the productive and reproductive spheres of the farm, as well as questions related to the educational and professional careers of the interviewees and their voluntary work.

4 Results of expert interviews

4.1 Succession of Austrian family farms

Under Austrian civil law, unless the deceased has made an inheritance contract (Article 602) or has drawn up a will, the property in question is divided among the heirs-at-law. This means that two-thirds of said property will be bestowed on the children and one-third on the spouse, with the amount bestowed to the children being divided equally among them (Bundeskanzleramt der Republik Österreich [RIS], n.d.).

However, in the case of farm inheritance, a special provision known as the Austrian Anerben Act (*Anerbengesetz*) (BGBl 1958/106, latest change BGBl I Nr. 38/2019) was stipulated as an amendment of the basic principles of Austrian civil law. The purpose of the Act is to avoid the division of hereditary farms (*Erbhöfe*) as far as possible, thereby ensuring the stable continuation of family farm management (Section 1, Purpose Clause). In Austria, hereditary farms represent a specific subgroup of family farms characterized by long-term intergenerational succession and legal recognition aimed at preventing land fragmentation.

The inheritance customs of Austrian family farms have varied by region (Table 1). The Austrian Anerben Act is currently applied to seven states of Austria, excluding Tyrol and Carinthia, which have their own unique farm-related laws (Landjugend Österreich, 2024).

In Austria, the overwhelming majority of hereditary farms are transferred to the next generation through notarized lifetime transfer contracts rather than through statutory or testamentary succession under civil law. In this scenario, siblings are renouncing their inheritance rights and are compensated with money or a small plot of land. The Austrian Anerben Act states in Article 3 that “*with regard to the principles for determining the succession to a farm, should there be disagreement among the joint heirs as to farm succession, the following principles shall be applied: Descendants of the deceased who are or were raised in agriculture or forestry have priority over others. Among several descendants raised in agriculture or forestry, preference is given to those who grow up or were raised on the hereditary farm.*” Age decides between heirs with the same qualifications, depending on local customs; the preference for the eldest (*Majorat*) or youngest (*Minorat*) as successor was a customary practice, but in most cases, the eldest son was the heir (Kretschmer, 1980). However, men and women are legally equal, and even girls can become farm successors if they are interested in agriculture or forestry and receive the required vocational education and training.

4.2 Farm transfer contracts

Farm transfer/succession in Austria takes place mostly at the time the farm transferor starts to receive an old-age pension. According to an Austrian-wide survey on farm succession in 2018, male farm managers planned to transfer their farms at an average age of 62 and female farm managers at 60 (Larcher and Vogel, 2019). The qualifying age for receiving the old-age pension in Austria was raised to 65 years in 2024. Nevertheless, workers in agriculture and forestry are able to make use of the heavy-labor work pension system, which can be received upon reaching the age of 60 after paying social insurance premiums for a minimum of 540 months (Landjugend Österreich, 2024). It is also sometimes the case that a successor leases the farm before taking it over.

The farm transfer contract must be drawn up by a notary or lawyer. There can be varying degrees of discomfort and/or conflict within the family because it is a time of great change. In order to avoid mistakes, families can make prior use of the legal consultation services and training workshops offered by the Chamber of Agriculture.

By signing the farm transfer contract, the successor is required to commit to providing lifestyle security for the transferor in old age in exchange for the transferor’s handing over the farm in its entirety, including the residence. According to a nationwide sampling of female farmers in 2016, among the respondents, 40% lived with their mother-in-law, 29% with their father-in-law, 15% with their mother, and 12% with their father (Mayr *et al.*, 2017). Most female farmers live in multigenerational households, but nowadays they usually have separate living spaces for each generation.

Table 1. Farm ownership status of female farmers by federal state, Austria.**Tableau 1.** Statut de propriété des agricultrices par État fédéré, Autriche.

	Share of female farm managers (2020)*	Female farmers by farm ownership type**				Farm inheritance act	Family farms inheritance customs 1900–1914***
		Owned jointly by husband and wife	Owned exclusively by husband	Owned exclusively by wife	Other		
Total	31%	51%	31%	13%	6%	EHA (1958–)	
Burgenland	34%	54%	18%	19%	8%	EHA (1958–)	mixed
Carinthia	27%	19%	58%	21%	2%	CHFA (1903/1930/1990–)	undivided
Lower Austria	31%	62%	19%	13%	6%	EHA (1958–)	undivided
Upper Austria	35%	62%	19%	14%	5%	EHA (1958–)	undivided
Salzburg	38%	56%	34%	7%	4%	EHA (1958–)	undivided
Steiermark	35%	59%	24%	12%	5%	EHA (1958–)	undivided
Tyrol	17%	15%	65%	12%	8%	TLIAE (1900–)	undivided
Vorarlberg	20%	29%	46%	13%	13%	EHA (1992–)	divided
Vienna	25%	Combined to Lower Austria				EHA (1958–)	undivided

Abbreviations: Exclusive Heir Act (EHA), Carinthian Hereditary Farms Act (CHFA), and Tyrolean Law of Inheritance for Agricultural Estates (TLIAE).

Sources: * BML (2021). ** Mayr *et al.* (2017). ***Kretschmer (1980).

Until about 30 years ago, it was quite common for the transfer contract to stipulate numerous services that the transferees had to provide to the transferors, such as daily meals, laundry, transport to church services, or other care arrangements. Due to changes and improvements in the social security and pension system, these services are often no longer included in the contracts (Otomo and Oedl-Wieser, 2009).

A legal brochure for female farmers discusses the following challenge in relation to old-age security for those who have transferred their farms: if one son, as heir, inherits the farm exclusively, his wife (the elderly parents' daughter-in-law) has no legal obligation to carry out household tasks (cooking, laundry, etc.) or to provide nursing care services (Bäuerinnen Österreich, 2023).

4.3 Challenges in joint farm ownership by married couples

The question that causes the most anxiety for the majority of transferors is whether they should transfer the management of the farm to a child in the form of exclusive ownership rights or to the child and his/her spouse in the form of joint ownership rights, since co-ownership remains effective even after divorce (Landjugend Österreich, 2024). The successor in this case may then be a married couple. If the successor inherited the farm before marriage, the farm transfer contract must be re-signed by the couple in order for the spouse to own the farm.

When a farm is passed down to a child and his/her spouse and is owned jointly by the couple, should the rights over the farm be divided among the two spouses, the mutual agreement of both will be legally required with regard to all measures associated with farm management.

In Austria, since divorce and cohabitation by unmarried couples are becoming more common, “the formation of “common property ownership between husband and wife”

(in the form of a notarial act) is not recommended (Landjugend Österreich, 2024). In other words, joint farm ownership by a child and his/her spouse is generally no longer necessarily recommended by the Chamber of Agriculture because it risks having the farm split up in the future. However, the legal brochure for female farmers states that if the child-in-law is willing to put his or her work into the business and perhaps even invest his or her own money, the co-ownership option is probably preferable (Bäuerinnen Österreich, 2023).

5 Case study: semi-structured interviews with 14 active female farmers

This section presents findings from semi-structured interviews with 14 “active female farmers.” Based on qualitative data, the study not only provides detailed case accounts but also examines women's roles in the farm transfer process and the challenges they face by comparing the experiences of female successors and the wives of successors.

5.1 Interviewees

As shown in Table 2, the 14 interviewees are divided into two groups: seven farm women who succeeded their parents' farms as female successors (Nos. 1–7) and seven farm women who are married to farm successors (hereafter, wives of successors) (Nos. 8–14). Two of the female successors (Nos. 6 and 7) are also wives of successors whose husbands had also inherited their parents' farms.

Thirteen of the 14 interviewees are farm managers: one is the sole farm manager (No. 1); one is the sole farm manager and her husband is also the sole farm manager (No. 7), *i.e.*, each member of the couple manages their own farm; and the remaining 11 are conjugal co-managers. In Eurostat's FSS,

Table 2. Sample of interviewees in Upper and Lower Austria.
Tableau 2. Échantillon de personnes interrogées en Haute et Basse Autriche.

No.	Interviewee	Year of birth		Year of marriage	Year of farm succession	Female successor	Successor's wife	Farm manager			Farm owner			Agricultural vocational qualification		Farm household status	Currently owned farmland	Agricultural management sector	Off-farm work (%)	
		W	H					W	W	H	W	W	H	W	H				W	H
1	Josefine	1970	1965	1990	1995	X		X			X			M		P	12 ha	Crops, Livestock		80
2	Gertraud	1972	1971	1992	1997	X		X			X			M	S	F	24 ha	Livestock, HA, FPS		
3	Angelina	1973	1973	1998	2010	X		X			X			S	M	F	46 ha	Crops, Livestock	40	
4	Susanne	1980	1980	2021	2011	X		X			X			S		P	8 ha	Livestock		100
5	Angelika	1989	1986	2014	2021	X		X			X			S		F	13.2 ha	Livestock, FPS		
6	Angela	1973	1967	2002	1991/1999	X	X	X			X	X		S	M	P	11 ha/30 ha	Crops, FPS		60
7	Helga	1978	1975	2001	1997	X	X	X			X	X		S	M	F	26 ha/24 ha	Crops, Livestock, FPS		
8	Verena	1966	1961	1985	1991		X	X			X			Ma		F	14 ha	Livestock, Ham	70	
9	Eva	1968	1966	1989	1995		X	X			X			S		F	25 ha	Livestock		
10	Katharina	1979	1978	2011	2015		X	X			X			S	S	P	14 ha	Viticulture, winemaking	20	70
11	Klara	1973	1968	1993	2002		X	X				X			S	F	47 ha	Crops, Direct marketing	70	
12	Ursula	1973	1970	1995	1995		X	X			X				M	P	16 ha	Livestock	50	
13	Julia	1974	1972	2001	1995		X	X			X				M	F	17 ha	Livestock, Direct marketing		
14	Regina	1981	1972	2006	1999		X		X		X			S	S	F	14 ha	Livestock, Direct marketing	40	

*Not marriage but partnership.

Abbreviations: Wife (W), Husband (H), Master (M), Skilled worker (S), Matura (Ma), Full-time farm household (F), Part-time farm household (P), Holiday apartment (HA), and Food processing & sales (FPS).

All interviewee names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Sources: Elaborated by the authors based on the interviews conducted from March to May 2022.

each holding is officially recorded with a single farm holder, namely the farm manager, which indicates that women's roles in joint farm management are often overlooked and thus pose a barrier to gender equality. In contrast, according to the definition of the Social Insurance Organization for the Self-Employed in Austria, a farm manager is a person who manages an agricultural or forestry holding at his or her own expense and risk and who may manage the holding individually, jointly with a spouse or registered partner, or jointly with other persons ([Sozialversicherungsanstalt der Selbständigen, 2025](#)).

However, the farm manager is not always the farm owner. All seven female successors (Nos. 1–7) are farm owners, and five of them (Nos. 1–5) had the family farm handed down to them from their parents along with their husbands. The remaining two (Nos. 6 and 7) solely own their parents' farms and have husbands who also inherited the farms from their parents, and one of them (No. 6) also co-owns the farm her husband inherited. As for the wives of successors, three are farm managers who own the farm jointly with their husbands (Nos. 8–10), three are farm managers but do not own the farms (Nos. 11–13), and one is neither farm manager nor farm owner (No. 14).

5.2 Female successors

Female successors are not only single children (Nos. 6 and 7) or only daughters (Nos. 1–3). In the case of No. 4, whose brother was not interested in agriculture, and No. 5, whose brother's partner disliked the idea of becoming a farm woman, the youngest daughters received education and training in agriculture and succeeded to the farm with their husbands.

All of the seven female successors had obtained vocational qualifications in agriculture. In some cases, the husbands of female successors obtained vocational qualifications in agriculture in preparation for their marriage (Nos. 2–3), while in other cases, they did not. Even those husbands without vocational education and training in agriculture became farm owners because their income from self-employment in non-agricultural fields (No. 5) or from off-farm employment (Nos. 1 and 4) was used to maintain the family farm.

The cases show that female successors are generally in a secure position to be recognized as legitimate farm managers and owners, especially through agricultural education and relevant qualifications.

5.3 Wives of successors

Here, we examine four cases in which three wives of successors (Nos. 8–10) and one female successor (No. 6) jointly manage and co-own a farm with their husbands. These women are daughters who grew up on farms and received vocational education and training in agriculture, either during their initial education (Nos. 6, 8, 10) or through continuing education (No. 7), and actively contribute to farm management.

Some of them have established sideline businesses on the farm, such as processing and selling their farm products (Nos. 6 and 10), managing holiday apartments (No. 8), or holding specialized qualifications necessary for applying for agricultural subsidies or securing agricultural loans (No. 9).

In Austria, where the proportion of part-time farms is high, there are also cases where wives work a higher percentage of hours on the farm than their husbands (Nos. 6 and 10), in which case it makes sense for women who contribute more to farm management than their husbands to be farm owners together with their husbands.

Angela (No. 6) is the eldest daughter of three siblings (eldest son, eldest daughter, and second daughter) in a part-time farming family. She obtained a vocational qualification in agriculture as a farm successor since her elder brother has a different father and took over the farm (about 11 ha) from her father in 1991, at the age of 17. Her husband inherited the farm (30 ha) from his father in 1999 prior to their marriage in 2002, but he works off-farm 60% of the time, and since she is a full-time farmer, they paid a notary €6000 in 2008 to register her husband's farm as joint property. This is because she needed to co-own the farm her husband inherited in order to receive farmer childcare benefits.

Verena (No. 8) is the eldest daughter of three siblings (eldest son, eldest daughter, and second daughter) in a farming family. Her parents' farm was inherited by her elder brother. She studied home economics at the Higher Vocational School of Agriculture (*HBLA*) and obtained her university entrance qualification (*Matura*) at the age of 18. In 1985, at the age of 19, she married the heir to the farm. In 1991, after the birth of her three children, she inherited together with her husband the farm and became a joint farm owner with her husband.

Eva (No. 9) was born as one of three sisters in a farm family. Her parents' farm was taken over by her sister. She attended a vocational school and took a job as an accountant. In 1989, at the age of 21, she married her husband, a successor to a family farm, and gave birth to their first son; in 1991, at the age of 23, she gave birth to their second son, quit her job as an accountant, and engaged in farming. She and her husband became tenants on his parents' hog-raising farm in 1995, when her father-in-law was 56 years old and her mother-in-law was 55 and not yet entitled to an old-age pension. However, her husband worked 40 hours a week off the farm as a coachbuilder and had only one year of agricultural education and training as an apprentice, making him ineligible for farm financing. In 1996, Eva took evening classes at an agricultural training school for three days a week and obtained a vocational certificate in agriculture, specialized in rural life home economics, became farm manager, and received a grant to build a barn. In 1997, the couple inherited the farm and made it jointly owned.

Katharina (No. 10) was born the eldest daughter of a part-time viticulture farmer, and her brother took over the farm. After four years of university studies in economics, two years of postgraduate studies, and a master's degree, she started working at the Austrian Market Control Organization (AMA) in 2005, at the age of 26. She also became a skilled worker in viticulture and winemaking in 2009 at the age of 30, married the heir of a viticulture and winemaking family in 2011 at the age of 32, and inherited with her husband the farm in 2015 when her father-in-law turned 64, making it jointly owned by the couple. The husband is employed in off-farm work 70% of the time and works 20% of the time in viticulture and winemaking, while Katharina is employed in off-farm work 20% of the time and works 60% of the time in viticulture and winemaking, so the couple are jointly farm managers.

On the other hand, those successor wives who did not own the farm included cases where there was tension between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law or where the parents-in-law were concerned about the possibility of future divorce. In another case, where the successor took over the debts of the parental farm, the successor wife did not own the farm jointly with her husband. There were also cases where wives of successors lacked interest in farm ownership.

Even when wives of successors make significant contributions to farm management, they often face institutional and customary barriers to ownership, which makes their position relatively vulnerable. Nevertheless, some succeed in achieving co-management and co-ownership through agricultural qualifications and/or the establishment of complementary farm enterprises.

5.4 Summary of case study

The case studies revealed contrasting patterns in the institutional recognition of farm ownership between female successors and the wives of successors. Female successors generally secured stable ownership through agricultural education and formal qualifications, whereas the wives of successors often faced constraints rooted in both customary practices and legal frameworks. Some wives attained joint management rights and co-ownership through agricultural qualifications or engagement in sideline farm activities. By contrast, husbands of female successors were not required to hold agricultural qualifications or to contribute actively to farm work to acquire joint ownership.

6 Discussion and conclusion

This study aims to examine the cultural norms and normative expectations that continue to impede women's ownership of farmland and to suggest possible ways to overcome these obstacles, focusing on Austria, one of the most advanced countries in the EU in terms of women's participation in farm management. Interviews with legal experts at the Austrian Chamber of Agriculture, an interest group representing Austrian farmers, and semi-structured interviews with fourteen "active female farmers" reveal the following key findings.

First, Austrian family farms are generally small in scale, and the Austrian Anerben Act seeks to prevent the subdivision of farms through inheritance wherever possible. Farm transfer contracts, typically concluded during the parents' lifetime, often require successors and their spouses to provide retirement security for the transferors. Multigenerational households involving in-laws remain common, shaping the division of labor within the household and influencing negotiations during the farm transfer process.

Second, with the development of Austria's social security system, the traditional expectation that daughters-in-law assume responsibility for housework and caregiving duties has largely disappeared from farm transfer contracts. Moreover, multigenerational households today often maintain separate living spaces for each generation. These changes indicate gradual progress toward gender equality in farm management and ownership. Nevertheless, wives of

successors frequently remain in insecure positions, as their contributions are not consistently recognized in ownership rights.

Third, the choice between sole ownership by the successor and joint ownership by the successor couple represents a critical decision for transferors. While joint ownership can strengthen the legal status of the successor's spouse and enhance their decision-making power within the farm household, it also entails the risk of farm fragmentation in the event of divorce. As a result, wives of successors continue to face both institutional and customary constraints on farm ownership.

In many regions of Europe, farming remains an essentially closed profession, accessible primarily to those who have inherited agricultural resources (Shortall *et al.*, 2020). Inheriting a farm is by far the most common way to gain access to the resources required for farming (Sutherland, 2023). However, across Europe, farms are more frequently inherited by men.

In Austria, joint farm ownership by married couples represents an effective means for women to gain access to farm ownership. Nevertheless, women farmers' ownership rights, whether as successors or as spouses, remain conditional and subject to negotiation and are generally regarded as subordinate to men's ownership rights. Furthermore, formal agricultural education and qualifications constitute a primary pathway through which women can acquire ownership of family farms, and their impact is more pronounced for women than for men.

Female successors tend to secure more stable ownership rights through formal agricultural education and qualifications. Since farm succession typically unfolds through a long-term process, it is essential to involve daughters and sons equally from an early stage and to establish gender-fair institutional frameworks that enable autonomous decision-making (von Davier *et al.*, 2023).

For the wives of successors, formal agricultural education and qualifications play a particularly important role in securing farm ownership rights. Accordingly, vocational education and training in agriculture that are accessible to women are expected to serve as an effective means of promoting gender equality in ownership rights within family farming.

Finally, as the findings of this study are based on qualitative data from five regions across two federal states in Austria, comparative research across countries is needed to develop a more comprehensive understanding of gendered farm ownership and to inform practical policy recommendations.

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