**Gendering through Agricultural Education in Belgium, c. 1860-1914: a Matruska Model**

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[Draft version]

1. Introduction

Implicitly or explicitly, historical research that combines 'agriculture' and 'gender' establishes a relationship between the declining role of women in agriculture and the process of agricultural modernization. The major lines of the story are well enough known: the introduction of scientific and technological innovations on the farm, the industrialization of food processing, and new forms of distribution, all of which served as springboards for the male 'colonization' of production tasks that previously were very much part of the female domain, in particular dairying, market-gardening and poultry-keeping. Female day hands and servant girls have disappeared from the farms and the role of the farmer's wife has been reduced to that of mother and housekeeper. In short, agricultural modernization has resulted in the defeminizing of agriculture, so that the family business has become a predominantly male preserve. When this happened differed from country to country and from sector to sector, but the trend was the same. Whether this process ought to be understood as a systematic exclusion of women from the modern agricultural business by a male-dominated society, or as a consequence of changing choices and patterns of behaviour on the part of women themselves is less evident.

What place in this process has to be given to education and instruction? Recent sociological studies indicate that, in its many forms, agricultural education is run predominantly by men, is geared to male labour and is extended chiefly to boys and men. Research underlines how the structure of agricultural education, the curricula taught and the instruction provided by agricultural organizations are a reflection of the gender inequality in society and in turn, via discourse and practices, serve to reinforce and legitimize that inequality.

The gender-specific approach of agricultural education was apparent right from the start, with educational initiatives being initially directed exclusively at farmers and their sons. The specific educational programmes that got under way in the late nineteenth century for farmers’ womenfolk took account of their triple task of working on the farm, housework and (future) motherhood, but the accent clearly came to lie on training to become good mothers and perfect housekeepers, which was

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1 McMurry (1994) points out, for example, that American women rejoiced at the industrialization of cheese-making; see also Valenze (1991), Sharpe (1999), Verdon (2002).
3 I use the word ‘education’ in this paper in the broad sense, i.e. including all forms of instruction for adults. See also Van Molle (2005).
4 A review in De Vuyyst (1891).
in line with their position in society: the farmer’s wife drew her identity from the fact that she was married to a farmer; working on the farm was simply an extension of this. Educational and training initiatives were not conceived as narrow occupational training as a farmer’s wife, but as a preparation for and underpinning of the life of a married housewife in the country. This is made evident by, for example, the analysis of associations of Belgian farming women, which – according to Gubin – bore witness to a "conception stéréotypée de la femme"\(^5\), and is also apparent from the research on Dutch instruction in agricultural housekeeping, which last – as aptly expressed by Margreet Van der Burg – “did not look to make a second farmer of the farmer’s wife”\(^6\), and research on the English Women's Institutes, which shaped rural women into "skilled" housewives\(^7\).

Available source material – chiefly of a standard-setting nature and drafted by those responsible for policy, i.e. men – permits a one-sided reading in terms of gender, namely that, via education, the farming woman was systematically steered towards the model of the middle-class housewife, albeit in an adapted and somewhat ambiguous version for the countryside. This paper suggests that one should not generalize as if the whole of agricultural education and all associations of farming women served from the outset to exclude women from the professional modernization and consequently the occupation of farming woman. The outcome of an evolution – much of the research concentrates on the inter-war years – does not necessarily coincide with the initial aim. Certainly where Belgium is concerned, a second reading of the source material is needed that gives due attention to the scientific and technical training of farming womenfolk.

**2. The Belgian case**

An interesting case for a fresh reading in these terms is formed by developments in Belgium prior to the First World War. Not only was Belgium industrialized at an early stage but in the nineteenth century had the highest population density in Europe and an extremely fragmented agricultural acreage. In that context, female labour – whether in agriculture or domestic or other industry – was an inherent component of family survival strategy. The intensive cultivation of the soil had already led early to agriculture performing to a very high level.

However, the food crisis of the 1840s demonstrated that the limits of the intensive system of agriculture had been reached. Demographic growth and high food prices gave an edge to the interest of politicians and landowners in the embryonic science of agriculture and in technological innovation as a means of alleviating the scarcity of food. The Agricultural Invasion and the sudden fall in prices from the 1880s on renewed the interest in science and technology, but then as a means of coping with international competition. From the beginning, thus, in line with this 'scientific turn', agricultural education was given a strong scientific and technical slant. In Belgium, the first secondary agricultural schools for boys were set up in 1848; agricultural education for girls was first instituted in 1888. With the swift expansion of agricultural education, including that for girls, Belgium rapidly found herself in the vanguard of Europe. At the World Exhibition in Paris in 1900, the Belgian Ministry of

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\(^7\) Morgan (1996); see also Thompson (1999).
Agriculture attracted attention with its *La campagnarde* pavilion extolling Belgium’s dairy produce, and with its being awarded the *Grand Prix* for its agricultural education for the daughters of farming people.

But this says nothing in either quantitative or qualitative terms about precisely what the country was a model for. How was education and instruction organized in terms of gender? Who determined the thrust of education for the womenfolk of farmers? How did the interaction among the various players influence the form and content of that education? The purpose of this paper is to discover the evolving balances of power that ultimately served to remove women from the modern farm. The analysis takes as its starting point the year 1859, when the first Belgian handbook for farming women appeared, and as its end point the year 1914, when the trend (which continued throughout the inter-war years) was already clearly established. It was a half-century that saw fundamental shifts taking place, albeit under the cloak of a virtually constant discourse.

### 3. Farming womenfolk in Belgium

The discourse about women in Belgian agriculture prior to the First World War can be summed up in a few, constantly recurring descriptive sentences: they were numerous, their work was indispensable for household and farm, and their work was gender-specific. There were also constantly repeated criticisms: the daughters of farming people quit the land for an urban and conventional way of life, farming women often had to work too hard and their work often lacked the desired know-how. What stands out is the constant and uniform character of this discourse, even in its critical aspects. From 1860 to 1914, indeed the discourse was highly repetitive, as indicated by the following review.

The share of agriculture in total employment in Belgium declined from about 55% in 1846 to 31% in 1895 and to 22% in 1910. In particular, there was a rapid fall in wage labour in agriculture among both men and women. It is nevertheless unclear how the ratio of men to women evolved. What is certain is that the number of farming women was grossly underestimated in the ten-yearly occupational censuses; the tellers regarded many farmers’ wives as simply “the wife of …” and thus failed to include them in the count. For this reason, it is enlightening to see what the perception of contemporary observers was. For example, Seebohm Rowntree – British author of a notable social study of Belgium, published in 1910 – stated that the occupational census of 1900 recorded just 108 000 farmers’ wives (as compared to 341 000 farmers), whereas he estimated the number of full-time farmers’ wives at no less than 200 000. Contemporaries stressed that the number of women in agriculture in Belgium was among the highest in Europe.

Government reports, regional sociological studies and other contemporary publications bear witness to the important role played by female labour on Belgian farms. The farmer’s wife was valued as a fully fledged component of the family

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9 Besides 108 000 farmers’ wives, the census also counted 55 000 female agricultural workers, Seebohm Rowntree (1910), pp. 203-204 and 591-595.

10 It was only in Italy that more women worked in agriculture, according *Éléments d'enquête sur le rôle de la femme* (1893), pp. 14 and 129.
agricultural economy. The farmer and his wife formed a duality whereby "l'union fait la force". Until 1914, her work in farming was never a point of discussion, but was perceived as being self-evident, unlike female labour in industry. According to Rowntree, moreover, the fact that the farmer’s wife co-operated in the work of farming was not an indication of poverty, but an inherent characteristic of the small-scale, mixed farm.

Many contemporary witnesses made no hierarchical differentiation among the various tasks of the farmer’s wife, which they simply summed up, in no particular order, as farmers’ wives do the milking, make butter, prepare the meals, work in the vegetable garden, look after the children, weed the fields, bind sheaves, collect eggs, sell vegetables and fruit at market, bake bread, etc. Such stereotypical, virtually timeless depictions reflected the complexity of ‘women’s work’, with its constant switching from task to task and from working-area to working-area: the house, the vegetable plot, the stable, the field and the market. If there was any sequence at all, it was sometimes the chronological, i.e. the sequence of tasks in the course of the day from the preparation of breakfast to house-feeding the livestock, then on to the housework, etc.

What is indeed noticeable is the high level of gendering in the regulative distribution of tasks between the farmer and his wife. Biological determinism was heard in such affirmative expressions as "la force a été donnée à l'homme". All heavy work fell to the farmer, both the work in the field and digging the vegetable garden, whereas the farmer’s wife had to limit herself to the lighter work on the farm, the stable, the poultry yard and the vegetable plot. However, that lighter work was then regarded as her duty and responsibility. According to a handbook from 1859, women should not relinquish the growing of vegetables: men lacked the necessary interest, knowledge and solicitousness for that; besides, they had no idea about what was needed in the kitchen. The dichotomous way of thinking served to accentuate the complementarity of farmer and farmer’s wife and to give recognition to their respective specializations.

At the same time, however, there was concern and criticism. Constantly recurring critical considerations were already being reflected in the Conseils à la jeune fermière by Pierre Joigneaux (1815-1892), the first handbook (if I am not mistaken) published in Belgium in the nineteenth century for farming women. Joigneaux was French by birth and was expelled from France in 1851 on account of his outspoken liberal and republican persuasion. He moved to Belgium, where he set up a successful market-gardening business and made himself known as an indefatigable lecturer and publicist. His numerous articles and books combined scientific underpinning with practical experience, an interesting mix that made him a pioneer of Belgian agricultural education.

11 De Landbouwster (jan. 1912), pp. 2-3.
13 Joigneaux (1859), pp. 11-12 and 95-96.
For contemporary witnesses, the fact that farming women worked hard was not the greatest concern. Their labour was soberly assessed as being inherent to the sector and was sometimes even regarded with admiration and astonishment. Observers noted that many worked from the crack of dawn to late in the evening and that, ‘out of necessity’, they also engaged in the hard work of lugging buckets of water, spreading manure and pulling beet. Rowntree amusingly mentioned that a farming household without sons managed because the six daughters could plough so well. Where men were engaged in seasonal labour elsewhere, a frequent phenomenon in certain regions of Belgium, the womenfolk, together with the elderly and the children, themselves took on all the work on the farm.\(^\text{15}\)

However, that hard work was accorded a negative connotation in the area of tension between town and countryside. The flight from the land was a perpetual concern, the more so as the attraction of the town not only drew the social underclass from the countryside, but also hit the richer farming families. Joigneaux’ Conseils began with a few pages of criticism of the urban boarding-schools that turned the heads of country girls. The baneful influence of boarding-schools on the daughters of the larger and big farmers was a painful matter that continued into the inter-war years. However, the daughters of smaller farmers and agricultural workers also turned their backs on farm life. The reservoir of female 'helpmates' began to run dry, as girls preferred to go into service in the town or to take better-paid wage work in trade or industry.\(^\text{16}\)

The burden of the heavy work was set against the delight of the outdoor life. In Belgium, just as elsewhere, the idealization of the countryside was based on the glamorization of the beauty and healthiness of nature, in contrast to the perniciousness of the town and industry. Among the motives advanced in favour of living in the countryside, what predominated was that of health and well-being – not just physical, but also mental and moral – the regenerative power of nature being set against the fear of the moral decline and degeneration of the race.\(^\text{17}\) The paean thus concerned nature and was not an uncritical hymn of praise to those who lived in and managed the countryside, i.e. the rural population. The counsel given to farming women betrayed criticism that was levelled equally at female workers in trade and industry: their lack of hygiene, the monotonous food, the waste, the disorder of the home; briefly, shortcomings in household organization, in knowing what to do and knowing how to do it. Farming women attracted criticism on two fronts, even, i.e. that it was both as housekeepers and farmer’s wives that they lacked insight and know-how.\(^\text{18}\) They were explicitly included in the social project of popular education that was pushed through at an accelerated rate following the economic crisis of the 1880s, and in the battle against poor housing, poverty, ignorance, moral decline and contagious diseases. They were at the same time included in a wide-ranging agricultural project.

4. The agricultural project

The Agricultural Invasion and its consequences reinforced the exodus of labour from agriculture to town and industry. In order to counter the fall in agricultural prices, Belgian farms sought salvation in intensification, in mechanization and in switching

\(^{15}\) Joigneaux (1859), pp. 12 and 98; Rowntree (1910), pp. 205-209 and 210-211.

\(^{16}\) Enquête agricole 1886; De Vuyst (1891), p. 6; Julyano (1897), pp. 4-7.

\(^{17}\) Matthieu (1907); De Vuyst (1907), pp. 155-158; Nys (2002).

\(^{18}\) De Vuyst (1907), pp. 10-11.
to more profitable branches of agriculture, particularly cattle-breeding and horticulture. The process of conversion got well under way once the agricultural crisis had passed its nadir, which was around 1895: new machines and tools made their appearance, the sale of artificial fertilizers soared, the use of improved seed and improved cattle breeds increased and dairy farmers and horticulturalists found an outlet for their products in the expanding dairy and preserving industry.

The transformation of agriculture was, on the one hand, prompted by the effects of the second industrial revolution. In the wake of the upturn in the economic cycle, broad layers of the population came to enjoy greater purchasing power: between 1895 and 1914, indeed, there was a notable rise in per capita consumption of meat and dairy produce, vegetables and fruit. On the other hand, it was guided and supported by government policy. The series of homogeneous Catholic administrations that held power unbroken from 1884 to 1914 refused to combat the agricultural crisis with high tariff barriers. In fact, the free import and falling prices of basic foodstuffs, such as bread grain, were doubly favourable for industry: they enabled it to keep workers’ wages low and helped to temper social unrest among the working classes. At the same time, however, the government set in train an extensive programme to make agriculture competitive again, a programme that can best be described as a combination of agrarian modernism and social conservatism. Modernization at the level of agricultural production, processing and distribution was designed not only to improve the market position of agriculture, but also to preserve the social, political and ideological status quo. The Catholic model of society, of which the agricultural project was a component, represented a conflict-avoidance strategy that sought balance between ranks and classes, between town and countryside, industry and trade. It was a model for Christian solidarity that attempted to counter the excesses of capitalism, liberal individualism, the threatening socialist class struggle and secularization. It accentuated the negative image of town and industry to the advantage of an exaggerated idealization of the countryside. Given that the Catholic pillar counted the farmer among its ‘natural’ allies, its efforts on behalf of agriculture also had an economic, political and ideological significance. The list of both government and private initiatives of those years is long and impressive; in real terms, moreover, the budget of the Ministry of Agriculture expanded fivefold between 1885 and 1914. In respect of private initiative, mention has certainly to be made of the success of farming organizations: by 1914, the farmers’ guilds were boasting a male membership of something like 100,000 and the still young institutes and guilds of farming women a female membership of a good 30,000.

Rowntree sought the explanation for the very high profitability of Belgian agriculture – certainly in comparison with that of British – partly in the expansion of agricultural education and instruction.

The consequence of the transformation of Belgian agriculture from the 1880s on was a reduction in cereal production in favour of fodder crops, grassland, cattle-breeding, pig and poultry-farming, dairy-farming and fruit and vegetable cultivation. In other words, agricultural production moved into areas in which an important role had been traditionally played by farming womenfolk. Did agricultural policy – and more particularly agricultural education – play a part in this and what role was allotted to

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19 Segers (2003).
farming women in the transformation? Research exposes a Matruska model: three educational models fitting inside each other like the components of a Russian doll, the first hiding the second and the second the third.

5. The first model: agricultural knowledge

The nineteenth century elite was fascinated by scientific discovery and technical innovation. In its faith in progress, it believed in the popularization of science: expert education and instruction for the masses would pave the way for a general rise in prosperity and well-being. From the mid-nineteenth century, efforts at popularization went ahead by leaps and bounds. In this, a primary role was given to the agricultural sector, which was responsible for providing the most elementary requirement of man, i.e. food. The farm itself formed an excellent enclave for scientific research, an observatory of ‘divine creation’ and a laboratory for meteorology, geology, physics, chemistry, botany, etc.

Around 1850, a genuine educational offensive got under way in Belgium with the aim of bumping up food production. By means of secondary agricultural schools, handbooks, periodicals, experimental fields, cattle competitions, etc. the attempt was made to replace the traditional ‘learning by doing’ by scientifically based action. It is remarkable how these forms of education attempted to link a substantial dose of theoretical knowledge (about geology, chemistry, botany, zoology, mechanics, veterinary medicine) with practice deriving from it, such as the science of fertilization, drainage, the cross-breeding of cattle, arboriculture, the treatment of livestock illnesses and the use of new tools. The public targeted was male, but quickly women entered the picture. In 1859, Joigneaux spoke out categorically "faites pour les filles ce que vous faites pour les garçons. Elles ont dans l'exploitation leur large part de la besogne et de responsabilité". He was also arguing at that time for the establishment of "écoles de ménagères" as a counterpart to the agricultural schools for boys, in order to instil among farming womenfolk "de bonnes notions scientifiques", necessary for the intelligent running of a business, as well as to allow them to absorb useful knowledge. A good four-fifths of Joigneaux's book consisted of detailed technical information about poultry-keeping, dairying and horticulture (fig.1). In short, the book aimed at professionalizing the farming woman.

This professionalization offensive continued until 1914, with great influence being had by three eminent scientific and learned societies. The apolitical Société Centrale d'Agriculture de Belgique, established in 1853, was a forum for discussion among specialists in modern agricultural science, and promoted popularization. The Société Scientifique de Bruxelles, established in 1875, looked to promote the advance and spread of science, but at the same time to repair the growing gap between faith and reason; in its struggle against belief-sapping Darwinism and Positivism, it viewed the practise of science as discovering God’s creation. The Société belge d'Économie Sociale, established in 1881, served as a think-tank for Catholic social scientists, who followed the observational method of the social conservative Frédéricq Le Play with a
view to achieving a precise analysis of socio-economic reality. These circles provided the intellectual basis, as well as the political programme and staff cadre for the Ministry of Agriculture, which was established in 1884. Among the key figures were Ridder Alphonse de Moreau d’Andoy, Minister of Agriculture from 1884 to 1888, and Alphonse Proost, Doctor of Natural Sciences and, from 1886 to 1911, top civil servant at that ministry.

Proost was an eminent specialist in agricultural chemistry. However, pure science was for him no more than part of the search for the whole truth. Central to his efforts to improve the world was the passing-on of scientific knowledge. His conscious wish was to be both “scholar and popularizer.” Partly inspired by the philosophy of evolutionary progress that was associated with Herbert Spencer, he developed his own educational model. From the mid-1870s he fulminated against the existing system of education, including the boarding-schools and teacher training colleges for girls. In his pedagogical work, which included the book Éducation de la femme selon la science, he based himself on the law of thermodynamics concerning the conservation of energy: "la nature a un budget fixe, ce qu'elle dépense sur un point, elle l'économise sur un autre." He abhorred the stultifying mnemonic method of teaching and the exaggerated piano culture that brought on neuroses among girls. What he argued for in place of that was a healthy balance between physical and intellectual training, something that was perfectly feasible in agricultural education.

For the development of understanding, he advanced his ‘intuitive pedagogy,’ which was based on observation and experiment, and which was also suitable for girls. According to Proost, women had by nature a special predisposition for the natural sciences, observation and experiment. He sought the explanation for this in their sensitivity to the beauty of nature, their sense of detail, their imaginative power and inborn patience. In spite of this, he remained a protagonist of differentiation: women had to remain women."Il ne s'agit pas, en découvrant à l'intelligence féminine les lois de la nature, de faire de toutes les filles des astronomes et des physiciennes." Their initiation into science should serve to make them better spouses, mothers and housekeepers, to the benefit of society as a whole. Indeed, he shared this view with other progressive educationalists who likewise place the introduction of women to science within the context of home economics.

Applied to the agricultural sector, male and female cognitive needs and areas of know-how were close. The initiation of farming womenfolk into science had a dual finality: the improvement of housekeeping and of the conduct of farming. Proost was convinced, and remained so until 1914, that progress in agriculture had partly to be achieved through the woman: "non seulement par le coeur, mais par l'intelligence des choses de la vie rurale, par la science agricole." From 1881, inspired by examples from Norway, Denmark and Wurtemberg, he pressed for occupational education for

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27 Address 1888, quoted in Manifestations en l’honneur de M.A. Proost, p. 2.
28 Proost (1896), p. 16; see also Proost (1897).
29 ‘Intuitive pedagogy’ continued as the recommended method for all Belgian agricultural education: it was based on observation, experiment, demonstration and active participation on the part of the pupils, see De Vuyst (1909).
30 Proost (1896), p. 7, generally, pp. 5-16.
31 As did the left-wing feminist and educationalist Isabelle Gatti de Gamond (1839-1905), see Wils (1999).
32 Address Proost, quoted in Giele (1912), p. 10.
farming womenfolk. The Ministry of Agriculture provided the ideal framework for this. The choice fell on dairy education and not without reason, given the expansion of the dairy sector: between 1880 and 1910 the number of milking-cows in Belgium rose from 790,000 to 980,000, the average annual milk yield from 1,900 litres to 2,700 litres. In 1887, the ministry had research conducted into dairy education in Denmark; in 1888, it sent two young women to Coëtlogon in Brittany for dairy training; and in 1890, it began itself with travelling dairy schools for girls. Courses lasted from one to three months and the organization was in the hands of male State agronomists, although the lessons were given by females. The travelling dairy schools achieved reasonable success and it is estimated that they awarded a total of 2,000 diplomas between 1890 and 1903. Besides these travelling schools, there were also a number of fixed dairy schools. In addition, the State made modern dairy equipment available, with which both teachers and, in their turn, graduates could give short demonstration sessions: in 1894, for example, 193 such sessions took place, lasting from between a week and fourteen days.

The approach to dairy education was both theoretical and practical, and the contents of a respectable level. In courses, demonstrations, lectures, handbooks and magazine articles, both juvenile and adult farming womenfolk were bombarded with a great deal of scientific and technical jargon regardless. Their knowledge was enlarged from the microbiology of milk to the latest methods and most modern instruments (fig. 2). The emphasis lay on purity and the rational processing of milk, which is to be understood as handling milk hygienically and economically with the minimum of labour. The purpose of this education was to “keep our milk industry up to date with progress” and, more broadly, “to contribute towards the training of good (female) tenants” or, in other words; towards their being able “to take care of the internal work of a farm”. The spatial limitation is revealing: the farming woman was trained for dairy work on the farm, ranging from the actual milking to the processing of the milk and to the manufacture of butter and cheese.

During the 1890s, the ministry broadened its professionalization offensive and there followed countless subsidized lectures and courses for farming womenfolk on poultry-keeping, rearing calves, pigs and goats, cattle food, vegetable and fruit cultivation (particularly for home use) and stable hygiene. 'Professionalization' was also the tenor of the terminology used, as, for example, “un enseignement professionnel agricole aux fermières”. The concept was synonymous with modernization of the farm, particularly in the sense of rationalization and maximizing earning capacity. The importance of that professional education was repeatedly expressed at international agricultural congresses: in 1891 at The Hague, 1895 at Brussels, 1900 at Paris, in 1905 at Liège, in 1910 again at Brussels and in 1911 at Madrid. Time and again in this respect, Belgium was held up as a shining example: “la nation européenne qui a poussé le plus loin l’éducation de la fermière”.

33 De Vuyst (1891), p. 5.
34 Situation de l’enseignement agricole. Rapport triennal.
35 De Bruyn, Parlementaire Handelingen van de Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 22 March 1895, p. 1063.
36 Deleu en D’Hondt (1904), annex “Staatsmelkerij en huishoudscholen voor jonge dochters”.
37 IXe Congrès international d’agriculture tenu à Madrid du 1er au 7 mai 1911, 1ère section, thème II: Enseignement agricole et instruction des classes rurales.
In the main, the experts who undertook the education of farming women were male and included many agricultural scientists and veterinary surgeons, officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, professors at the agricultural colleges of Gembloux and Leuven, teachers at secondary agricultural and horticultural schools, and staff of farming associations. Notably in respect of dairying were the female experts who, until 1914 continued to give technical lessons and demonstrations, write dry-as-dust handbooks and articles in trade journals, and speak at congresses. That some of them were also married serves only to highlight further the atypical gender relationships in the agricultural sector.

A remarkable fact – and one that the ministry itself picked up on – is that it was precisely dairying education for farming womenfolk that brought about the transformation and in time the masculinization of the dairy sector (fig.3). According to the minister responsible in 1895, the dairying courses "ont été, en quelque sorte, le point de départ de la formation de différentes coopératives entre fermiers (my emphasis) pour le travail du lait en commun". At that moment, he numbered a good thirty co-operative dairy factories. One official testified that the establishment of a co-operative dairy factory followed in virtually all municipalities where a travelling dairying school had been set up. This shows how easily the boundary between the male and female domains in the agricultural sector were breached: the dairy experts who, under the directions of the ministry, took on the education of men were in fact women. Around 1900, the ministry appointed two female ‘Advisers in Milking Science’ – married women, to boot – whose task was described as follows: "The advisers in milking science are charged with familiarizing the founders of dairy or cheese factories with the material organization of co-operative societies, as well as providing farmers with all information and advice they might need regarding the preparation of butter and cheese. As married women had no legal competence to act, they could not themselves be founders of or partners in co-operative dairy factories. Until 1914, they were nevertheless recognized as the experts.

The following step was in line with traditional gendering, with dairy courses for women being followed by dairy courses for men; these latter were, namely, “to train competent overseers and managers of dairy factories” and were held in the vicinity of steam-driven dairy factories (Borsbeke, Oplinter). Again, women were the first instructors in the travelling state dairy schools for boys.

6. The second model: domestic skills

"Since my daughter left that school (rural domestic science school), she reckons that everything here at home has been neglected and that she’ll be sweeping and cleaning the whole day long." This statement by a farmer illustrates the trend that began to take shape during the 1890s. The one-sided professional orientation of agricultural

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38 For example, Louise Van-Damme-D'Hondt, Haentjens-Deleu, Hallet-Monseur, Nahon-Gijsmans.
39 Situation de l'enseignement agricole; as at the end of the 1890s, there were approximately 300 dairy factories in Belgium, a mix of hand-milking and steam-driven-milking enterprises, both private and co-operative.
40 De Vuyst (1907), p. 67.
41 Deleu en D'hondt (1904).
42 "Staatsmelkerijscholen voor jongelingen", in Deleu and D'Hondt (1904).
43 De Vuyst (1907), p. 67.
education for farming womenfolk did not satisfy everyone. The dairy schools were regarded as being too specialized, their programme covering only a part of the farming woman’s daily life. With effect from 1891, the ministry began to organize full-time home economics instruction for country girls from the age of fourteen. The main emphasis was not on theoretical subjects (arithmetic, book-keeping, chemistry), but on practical, to do with both agriculture (cattle breeding, dairying and horticulture) and domestic science (cooking, washing, polishing sewing). The "écoles de laiteries volantes" changed virtually without a whisper into "écoles ménagères ambulantes pour jeunes filles." Home economics also began to make headway in the subsidized lectures and courses for farming womenfolk.

An important pioneer in this development was Paul De Vuyst who, with effect from 1898, was given total charge of agricultural education. He and his entourage were consistent in describing instruction in agricultural home economics as "un enseignement professionnel", but they gave a new meaning to that concept. For them, it was less a question of the professionalization of the business of agriculture, but of the professionalization of housekeeping. Henceforth, the farming woman was expected to adopt a rational, efficient and hygienic approach to her tasks as housekeeper and mother "avec intelligence, ordre et méthode". Instruction in agricultural matters did not disappear for farming womenfolk, but after 1914 was incorporated into a broader educational project.

The farming woman played a key role in De Vuyst’s educational project, in which the aim was "the raising of the social status of the farmer" and the appropriate instrument the training of the farming woman to be a good mother and housekeeper. There was nothing particularly original about this: both the educational aim and the actual fleshing-out of instruction in agricultural home economics took their inspiration from the municipal home economics schools that had been set up since 1887. The moment was well chosen: the economic upswing (from the mid-1890s as far as the agricultural sector was concerned) meant that the narrow focus on survival could be abandoned in favour of "l'amélioration de la vie rurale". The ultimate aim was to bring a halt to the flight from the land: "La jeune fille doit être préparée à sa vie de femme, en la sortant le moins possible de son milieu, et en le lui faisant aimer."

A careful reading of the sources reveals that, in this context, the lessons on cattle-breeding, dairying, etc. were given a different slant; henceforth, the farming woman

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45 Concerned here were primary agricultural home economics departments (from the age of fourteen, 100 hours of lessons in the winter for two years) and secondary agricultural home economics instruction (from the age of fourteen; one full school year; eighteen schools and five departments in 1911).
46 In 1900, home economics science was added to the program and the duration of training extended from three to four months; no more than a quarter of the practical lessons were still devoted to the business of agriculture; by the end of 1912, the total number of diplomas awarded had risen to 5,255, see Vander Vaeren (1913).
47 Versnick (1896); De Vuyst (1907) Chapter 4; Giele and Graftiau (1910), p. 44.
48 De Vuyst (1891).
49 De Vuyst (1907), p. 5 ff.
should have no more idea about agricultural science than was sufficient to be of support to the farmer”. This was the new thrust of thinking: the farmer’s wife could not be allowed to be an obstacle on the male path to modernity, “ought not to keep her man away from the latest innovations” (fig. 4). The view of farming was thus ‘masculinized’ and the role assigned to the farmer’s wife was simply one of being a “precious assistant in the running of his farm” (“la première et la principale collaboratrice du fermier”, “la compagne capable de s'associer à son œuvre”). In the (male-oriented) argument being advanced, her financial contribution was here and there even reduced to “loose change”.

Female teachers at agricultural home economics schools even twisted the purpose of agricultural education to one of farming girls needing to have an idea about dairying in order better to be able to know later what healthy milk would mean for their children. This was agricultural science in the service of the household, although it ought not to come as any surprise, as the step from, for instance, the cultivation of vegetables to the science of nutrition and the art of cooking is not big. In schoolish education and in lectures, the blurred dividing-line between the work of the farm and the work of housekeeping was indeed made good use of. Thus, the instruction in book-keeping given to womenfolk was to enable them not only to manage the household budget, but also to keep the farm accounts. A knowledge of agricultural science as such, though, came gradually to be considered as less important for women; the emphasis of education shifted from being on knowledge to being on practical ability and character formation. Agricultural home economics schools looked to training “auxiliaires de l’agriculteur, des ménagères intelligentes, amies du devoir, de la simplicité, de l'ordre, du travail, de l'économie”.

De Vuyst found inspiration for a crucial follow-up initiative during a study trip to North America in 1904. He was introduced to the Canadian Women’s Institutes, local associations of rural women that had been enjoying growing success since 1897; their organizational model prompted him to set up in 1906 a first Belgian institute of farming women. In their activities, both the Canadian model and its Belgian derivative placed the emphasis not on farming instruction, but on a narrow education of farming womenfolk to become mothers and housekeepers. Central to this was rational home economics (the science of nutrition, the saving of labour, the saving of time) and health care, embedded in a general discourse about the revitalization of the countryside and halting the flight from it.

The combination of agricultural home economics schools and associations of farming women served to accelerate and multiply all of this. Both former pupils of the schools and their mothers joined the institutes of farming women, and women teachers became lecturers. Since 1900, the teaching staff of the agricultural home economics schools had had their own discussion circle, which provided inspiration and maintained the dynamism. By 1913, the number of local associations of farming women...
women had risen to 283, with a total membership of 30,610. Thanks to two detailed annual reports, those for 1912 and 1913, we are extremely well informed about the lectures that they organized for their members. The reports indicate that the business of farming was indeed pushed to the background, between just a fifth and a quarter of lectures dealing with aspects of dairying, cattle-breeding or horticulture. The topic on the eve of the First World War was healthy food (nutritional value, method of preparation, recipes, preserving techniques), besides the raising of children, health care, hygiene and even the cosiness of the home.

The culmination of De Vuyst’s educational scheme was formed by three exhibition projects: *La Ferme démonstrative* at the World Exhibition at Liège in 1905, *Le Pavillon de la Fermière* at the World Exhibition at Brussels 1910 and *Le village moderne* at the World Exhibition at Ghent 1913. The three projects were male-inspired initiatives with a strongly prescriptive character with regard to women. Moreover, they were prestige projects that featured architects, specialists in the new building techniques and most modern facilities (for example, electric lighting and the water-closet), manufacturers of agricultural machines and household appliances (milk separators, stoves, etc.) and even the dairying industry (the company Nutricia). Agricultural home economics schools were specifically invited to display their special expertise and they filled the spaces with thematic exhibits (concerning food, clothing, the education of children, for instance) and gave demonstrations of rational home economics and dairy processing (fig. 5). What must have made visitors’ eyes pop were the wonderfully equipped kitchens. However, references to the ‘real’ work undertaken by women on the land, in the vegetable garden or in the stable were in actual fact minimal. The equipment, tools or appliances exhibited that had an explicit association with female labour referred chiefly to cooking and laundering. *Le Pavillon de la Fermière* opened a view of the future in which the farming woman was made highly respectable as professional "*maîtresse de maison*" and at the same time pushed into the role of mother and housekeeper. The theme of *Le village moderne* was the "beautifying of rural life" whereby the farming woman was depicted as the buffer against the flight from the land. Against the ambiguity of the present, these exhibitions set a less equivocal future of separated spheres.

### 7. The third model: Christian duties and virtues

Shortly before the First World War, there was yet another development in progress. Imperceptibly almost, a third pedagogical project pervaded the other two, more particularly the quiet appropriation (or re-appropriation, perhaps) of the farming woman as an instrument of the Catholic Church. There was nothing surprising in this: the Church had a long tradition as regards subjecting education to moralizing and devotional practices. The secondary agricultural schools and agricultural home economics schools, which had virtually all been established by Catholic congregations, added additional channels of influence. Instruction in agricultural home economics was given the additional task of strengthening "*l'esprit chrétien*" in society. Heard at a congress for farming women in 1909 was the affirming "*Nous aimons beaucoup les agronomes mais il est certain que nous ne voulons pas laisser à des laïcs le soin de l'instruction de nos enfants*". The institutes of farming women,

58 Graftiaux and Warnants (1905); Giele and Graftiaux (1910); De Vuyst (1913).
too, were a forum bent to the service of the Catholic social project. Furthermore, increasing numbers of clergymen began to appear on the podium, next to male and female lecturers.

The tendency towards clericalization was less explicit within the circuit of institutes of farming women set in train by De Vuyst, but all the more striking in the farming women’s guilds that formed part of the network of the Belgian Farmers’ League. That league’s first farming women’s guild was established in 1907 as countermove to the setting up of the first institute of farming women in 1906. This was followed in 1911 by the establishment of the Association of Belgian Farming Women as umbrella association above the guilds. Guilds and institutes developed virtually similar activities, but the Association of Farming Women, just as the Farmers’ League, was under the patronage of clerics, headed by Monsignor Luytgaerens. Using the Association of Farming Women and later the associations for the male and female youth of farming families, Luytgaerens sought to establish timely control over the entire farming family by bringing them all into a single Christian organization to be used as an instrument to consolidate the Christian countryside. The educational project of the Association of Farming Women turned on the image of the Christian spouse, mother and housekeeper. The underlying principle of the association was that it should "work for the religious, moral and social well-being of its members, for their development, their occupational needs and their material prosperity". The order was significant, the faith being placed first. All meetings of farming women’s guilds were obliged to commence with a “religious act”. In the association’s magazine, there was a steadily expanding stream of religious and moralizing articles about the duty to pray, devotion to the Holy Virgin Mary, the Christmas story, the moral education of children, etc. The didactic nature of the magazine increased, farming women being instructed, admonished and constantly referred to the proper schools of instruction, i.e. the agricultural home economics school, the farming women’s guild and the Church.

In the meantime, the Farmers’ League was instrumental in setting up and supporting co-operative dairy factories. In 1907, it established a dairying consultancy, using its own consultants who helped in the establishment of co-operative dairy factories; they advised the affiliated dairy factories in respect of book-keeping, operating techniques and the training of staff, provided assistance in the preparation of management meetings, inspected the technical equipment and supervised the finances. In this respect, there was no longer any question of a female contribution.

8. Conclusion

Agricultural education for womenfolk was begun as a two-step process, agronomic knowledge being provided by scientists and subsequently disseminated among an uninformed public, often by the scientists themselves. Many of these considered it their explicit duty to act as interpreters and popularizers. For specific segments of scientific knowledge, farming women were the appropriate target public, particularly in respect of the modernization of the Belgian dairying sector and, to a less extent, in respect of poultry-farming and horticulture. The process of dissemination accelerated

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60 De Caigny and Vanderstede (2005); Van Molle (1989 and 1990).
61 Lefebvre and Segers (2003).
in line with the increase in the number of interpreters. Women (both married and unmarried) found a role, too, in this process, tens of them – as experts – giving lessons and lectures (no everyday occurrence in those times). They represented an expert elite, recognized and respected by men; in this regard, agricultural education and instruction in agricultural home economics served to emancipate an elite band of women.

However, agronomy was not the only part of the story. Indeed, the two steps rapidly became three, the increase in the number of players creating an intermediary level between the science and the target public. That intermediary level involved itself in aims, and selected and gave a hierarchical structure to activities. The transfer of knowledge was not neutral and was clothed in a broader social and ideological project. Education and instruction did not deny the economic function of women – on the contrary – but first subordinated that function to women’s role as housekeepers and mothers, and subsequently subordinated it to the role of housewives as exemplary Christians. The farming woman found herself swept up in the predominating discourse on the separation of the professional from the domestic sphere. Clerical interference confirmed and reinforced that discourse.

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