

Reframing Women Farmers through Cultural Rural Feminism in Caraga Region, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the gendered dimensions of agricultural labor by foregrounding the lived experiences of women farmers in the Caraga Region of the Philippines. Framed by Feminist theory and situated within an interpretive qualitative paradigm, the inquiry employed in-depth interviews with (n=8) participants to capture situated knowledge as epistemic authority. Data were analyzed through Creswell and Poth's Data Analysis Spiral, with iterative movement between coding, categorization, and thematic construction. The findings were consolidated under the concept of Rural Feminism, a localized framework of empowerment grounded in agricultural labor, cultural traditions, and spirituality. Five subthemes were identified: (1) women's strategies for managing and sustaining farms, (2) the role of Christianity and spirituality in resilience, (3) the persistence of traditional gender norms, (4) experiences of exclusion and inequality, and (5) aspirations for equitable futures in agriculture. Results showed that while women faced limited recognition and structural inequalities, they asserted agency, influenced production decisions, and sustained rural communities. The study argued that women's contributions constituted leadership and authority in farming rather than auxiliary labor. The findings supported the integration of spirituality into the framework of Cultural Rural Feminism and its implications highlight the necessity of gender-sensitive agricultural policies, education, and support structures that recognize women as central to the sustainability and transformation of Philippine agriculture.

Keywords: Rural Feminism, Women Farmers, Gender and Agriculture, Spiritual, Data Analysis Spiral

INTRODUCTION

The connection of gender and agricultural labor has been documented in sociological and development research, yet women's participation as farmers remains comparatively underexplored, particularly within the Global South. Historically, women's agricultural contributions have been marginalized, rendered invisible under the dominant discourse that positions farming as a masculine occupation (Gilley, 2021). This symbolic exclusion persists despite empirical evidence that women are central to food production systems, both in household farming and smallholder contexts. As Mehra (1995) emphasizes, "to overlook women's agency in agriculture is to overlook half of the agrarian reality" (p. 31). Across agrifood systems, women are no longer only "farm helpers" but active decision makers on crops, inputs, labor, markets, and risk (Fletcher, 2023). Women's roles in Philippine farming are shifting from invisible support to visible authority over choices that shape production, income, and household security, yet official statistics still understate the scale of their work.

The 2022 Census of Agriculture and Fisheries found that only 21.8 percent of the agricultural population had ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, a structural limit on who can authorize high-risk and yield-oriented decisions (Dentzman et al., 2023). Labor force updates also show a stubborn reliance on unpaid family

work, which rose to 9.8 percent of total employment in February 2023, reinforcing the concern that women's contributions remain undervalued and underreported (Srygley et al., 2023). Internationally, women's decision space matters because agrifood systems still employ a large share of working women and because the returns to empowerment are material. FAO's 2023 assessment estimates that 36 percent of working women are engaged in agrifood systems and documents an 18.4 percent wage gap for women in agricultural wage employment, evidence that unequal control over income and inputs persists even as women take on core management roles (Ndondo, 2023). In recent decades, women farmers have emerged as a visible social category, challenging entrenched gender norms in agriculture. Robertson (2020) emphasizes the value of investigating farm women's experiences of "roles in farming households" and "gender relations" to foreground perspectives that have long been silenced. Similarly, Faxon et al., (2025) contend that examining the evolving role of women in agriculture requires attention not only to structural barriers, such as land access, training, and capital; but also, to cultural processes that continue to frame women as "farm wives" rather than farmers in their own right.

In the Philippines, this silence is particularly striking given women's active role in rice, corn, and vegetable production, as well as in fisheries and livestock raising (Ofreno & Hega, 2016). Despite their participation, women remain underrepresented in farm management decisions, leadership in cooperatives, and agricultural policy-making. Druza & Peveri (2018) suggests that "women's contributions are simultaneously indispensable and undervalued, sustained by patriarchal farm cultures that naturalize their invisibility". Women's entry into visible farming roles, therefore, is not merely demographic but symbolic; a disruption of historically gendered divisions of labor. Yet, the growing participation of women in Philippine agriculture has not translated into structural equity. Inequalities in access to land tenure, financial resources, agricultural extension services, and recognition in farm decision-making persist. Nichols (2024) notes that "as the number and percentage of women farmers in developed countries increase, the areas of research become more important". This is even more urgent in developing contexts, where women's growing visibility raises critical questions about how agricultural systems account for their voices. Lenge et al., (2018) further observes that women still face an "uphill battle in asserting themselves as farmers" pointing to the persistence of structural and cultural barriers.

While studies have examined the historical invisibility of women's agricultural labor (Nichols, 2024), there remains limited research on how women actively shape farm management and production-related decision-making in smallholder settings. Most literature on gender and agriculture in the Philippines has concentrated on women's reproductive and household roles, overlooking their agency as decision-makers in production and resource allocation. By centering women's voices and everyday practices, this study responds to Whitley & Brasier (2020) call to "open the farm gate to women". The significance of this research lies in its potential to reshape how women are perceived in Philippine agriculture, not as invisible laborers or secondary helpers but as autonomous farmers with decision-making power. Documenting their experiences provides insights not only for gender studies but also for agricultural policy, rural development programs, and community-based empowerment initiatives that aim to strengthen women's contributions to national food security. With this in mind, the study seeks to address the following questions:

RQ1: How do women farmers in the Philippines describe their roles and participation in production agriculture?

RQ2: In what ways do women exercise decision-making power in smallholder farm management and production practices?

RQ3: What barriers and opportunities shape women's recognition as farmers within Philippine agricultural communities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature identifies four primary findings: (1) the increase of women's participation in agriculture, (2) the historical roles assigned to women in agriculture, (3) the struggle of women to be recognized as farmers, and (4) inequalities in the Philippine agriculture sector. These findings inform this study through their attention to women farmers' perspectives and roles in agricultural production. While these themes appear in prior research, researchers recognize that the outcomes of this study may diverge. Following the review of related literature, the discussion proceeds to the theoretical framework, which advances the concept of Rural Feminism.

Growth of Women in Agriculture

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (2021), women comprise a growing proportion of agricultural producers, with women-operated farms contributing a considerable share of agricultural production. Although women remain underrepresented, their presence in farming continues to expand. Women farmers in the Philippines are generally younger than their male counterparts and are more likely to enter the sector as first-generation farmers, which places them at a relative disadvantage (Topacio, 2023). Scholars identify several factors

driving this growth. These include increased demand for niche products such as organic produce, the decline in average farm size, and broader acceptance of women's participation in farming. Changing social attitudes play an important role. First, women increasingly view farming as a viable occupational choice. Second, shifts in farm culture have created circumstances in which women take responsibility for farm operations, such as when assuming control of land from aging parents, continuing farm management after widowhood, or maintaining farms following divorce or separation (Chandra et al., 2017).

Previous Roles of Women in Agriculture

Women in agriculture have historically played a central but unacknowledged role. As observed, "gender is inherent as women are the unpaid and invisible labor force" in the agriculture industry (Lange et al., 2018). Much of rural research continues to concentrate on men as the primary agricultural actors while the perspectives of women remain limited in documentation despite their "contributions [being] essential to the viability of family farms". Ndondo (2023) argued that "while studies in the middle of the century tended to emphasize farm women's roles as mothers and homemakers...research constitutes that this is mostly a narrow-sighted and partial view of the social reality". In the Philippine setting, farm women have long managed gardens, tended livestock, sold produce in local markets, and provided labor in planting and harvesting cycles. This study does not reconstruct perspectives from past generations but instead records and preserves the experiences of contemporary women farmers (Maligalig, 2019).

Historical barriers to women's recognition in agriculture also resonate in the Philippines. Fremstad and Paul (2020) described how women's labor sustained agriculture while structural and legal obstacles restricted their access to land (Sachs et al., 2016). While women hold equal rights to land under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law, access remains constrained by scarcity of arable land, high costs of acquisition, and inheritance practices that privilege male heirs. Gender-specific barriers persist in financing, agricultural training, and recognition from formal institutions. Harris et al., (2023) stated, even though the industry relied on women's work, their contributions "continued to be invisible to the academic and social world." Nichols (2024) acknowledged that "women have been a critical part of farm and ranch operations across the country and across the globe for centuries," asserting that "women in agriculture have an opportunity to be the change we want to see in our industry." In the Philippine context, researchers remain divided on the extent to which such "opportunity" is accessible to women in farming communities (Maligalig et al., 2019).

The Struggle for Women to Identify as Farmers

Despite women's longstanding presence in agricultural work, the recognition of their identity as "farmers" remains contested. Instead, women are frequently labeled with secondary terms such as "farm wife." Whitley & Braiser (2020) observed that "traditionally, women on farms have been defined in terms of their marital relationship as farmwives instead of in terms of their connections to the land, the farms, or their children as farmers, farm women, or farm mothers". Ofreneo & Hega (2016) explained that gendered symbolic categories of farmer and farm wife have reinforced distinctions between masculinity and femininity, arguing that women encounter an "uphill battle in asserting themselves as farmers". They further noted that while there is growing literature on rural masculinity, research on women's perspectives remains limited.

In the Philippines, the struggle is evident in the way land titles and agrarian reform programs continue to prioritize men as formal landholders, while women's contributions are either subsumed under domestic roles or regarded as secondary. Fletcher (2023) found that men "underestimate their spouse's contribution" to farm labor, reinforcing Faxon et al., (2025) finding that women are portrayed as "the supporter of the male farmer, the homemaker, or the one who raises the children and cares for the elders". These portrayals obscure the scope of women's participation in planting, harvesting, marketing, and sustaining household food production. Although men acknowledge women's role in agriculture, they continue to contest the value of women's labor. As Gilley (2021) stated, the pathway toward recognition requires the industry to "open the farm gate to women by shredding historically entrenched patriarchal roles and norms". The concept of Rural Feminism in the Philippines extends from these realities. It situates the identity of women farmers within agrarian struggles, gendered land rights, and community-based labor systems. Rural Feminism acknowledges differences between men and women while asserting the agency and authority of Filipina farmers. It is shaped by cultural norms, religion, and traditions but also informed by women's collective resistance to exclusion in land reform, agricultural policy, and local governance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Feminist Theory, which interrogates the ways gender differences shape social roles, opportunities, and constraints across domains of life (McNay, 2013). The framework integrates difference feminism and labeling theory to examine how women in agriculture experience both structural inequality and cultural categorization. Difference feminism emphasizes the distinction between men and women in terms of biology, social roles, and cultural expectations. Jaffee & Hyde (2000) contends that moral reasoning and relational orientations vary by gender, suggesting that women's perspectives cannot be subsumed under a universal male model. In agricultural contexts, this perspective highlights how women encounter barriers to leadership while simultaneously rejecting reductive stereotypes tied to feminism. Valdejuli and Nieves (2020) observe that many women align with this strand of feminism without identifying as feminist, stressing instead the "defense of culturally or naturally based gender roles and expectations" (p. 134). Such positions argue that gender distinctions must be recognized, not erased, in understanding women's participation in farming.

Labeling theory provides a complementary sociological lens. Liamputtong & Rice (2021) argues that social labels create stereotypes, stigmas, and patterns of exclusion that shape individual identity and opportunity. In agriculture, women are frequently labeled as farm wives or helpers rather than as farmers, which marginalizes their contributions and constrains recognition of their agency. Mason-Sievers (2024) show how rural hegemonic masculinity and femininity reinforce normative boundaries of who counts as a "real farmer," yet also note that some women disrupt these relations by naming themselves simply as farmers. These acts of re-labeling resist entrenched patriarchal classifications and redefine women's place in agriculture. Drawing from both traditions, this research advances the concept of Rural Feminism. Rural Feminism recognizes that many women farmers accept gender distinctions as meaningful, rooted in biology, religion, or cultural tradition, while simultaneously asserting their agency in agricultural production. It reflects a situated form of feminist praxis that does not conform to conventional feminist identities but still challenges exclusionary norms within the agricultural sector. This framework provides the basis for analyzing how women farmers in the Philippines negotiate difference, resist labels, and claim space within agricultural decision-making and labor systems.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers position the inquiry within a qualitative, interpretive paradigm that privileges participants' meanings and lived experience (Frechette et al., 2020). Epistemologically, the study aligns with interpretivism and feminist viewpoint concerns that treat situated knowledge as epistemic authority (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Researchers treat women farmers' first-person accounts as primary sources for understanding decision-making in production agriculture. The study specifically adopts a phenomenological approach, seeks to disclose the essence of lived experience, making it well-suited for exploring how women farmers perceive, negotiate, and enact decision-making in agricultural contexts. Rather than focusing on external outcomes, phenomenology centers on the subjective meanings and experiential structures that shape human action. Husserl's principle of epoché or "bracketing" provides the philosophical foundation, requiring the researcher to suspend preconceptions in order to attend to participants' accounts in their own terms (Moran, 2013). It emphasizes that phenomenology involves identifying "invariant structures" across individual experiences, while Apter (1991) stresses the interpretive act of describing both the textural (what is experienced) and structural (how it is experienced) dimensions of a phenomenon. The study treats women farmers not as subjects of strategy categories but as bearers of insight into the structures of recognition, exclusion, and agency within rural development. Moran (2013) stresses that phenomenology seeks to "determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience". In this case, the investigation turns to women farmers themselves to explain how they decide, act, and reflect within the gendered structures of Philippine agriculture.

Research Sample and Procedure

In phenomenological research, it is important to select a homogenous sample in order to capture the depth of participants lived experiences with minimal external variation. For this study, the participants were drawn from the researcher's involvement in Project BINHI, a community-based initiative in the Caraga Region that engages directly with farmers and agricultural households. Through this project, access was established to women farmers who actively participate in agricultural decision-making within their families and communities. Inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) women actively engaged in agricultural production for at least five years; (2) married or partnered, with shared farming responsibilities alongside their husbands; (3) aged between 30 and 60 years, as this range reflects women with sustained involvement in farming and decision-making roles; and (4) residing within selected municipalities of Caraga Region where farming is a primary livelihood. Although 18 women initially met the criteria, only eight participants (n=8) were able to proceed with the interviews due to time constraints, health concerns, or prior commitments. For confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and participants are referred to

as Women Farmer 1–8. A brief description of each participant's background and characteristics is provided in Table 1.

Ethical Considerations

This study secured approval from the CSUCC Research Publication Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of the purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of coded identifiers and secure data storage. Participants' narratives were presented with respect to their dignity and agency. No conflict of interest was declared.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants.

Participant	Brief Life Story	Years as Farmer	Location
Woman Farmer 1	Grew up in a farming household; now manages a rice farm with her husband while also tending to livestock.	22	Socorro
Woman Farmer 2	Entered farming after marriage; combines vegetable gardening with copra production.	18	Tandag
Woman Farmer 3	Took over family farm after her parents aged; active in local cooperative and market selling.	25	Bislig
Woman Farmer 4	Balances rice and corn farming with childcare; negotiates farm input purchases.	15	Bayugan
Woman Farmer 5	Focuses on coconut and cassava farming; known in community for decision-making in seed selection.	20	Barobo
Woman Farmer 6	Helps manage small-scale integrated farm (crops and livestock); also teaches children farming practices.	12	Bayugan
Woman Farmer 7	Participated in NGO training on high-yield crops; applies modern practices in vegetable farming.	17	Socorro
Woman Farmer 8	Assumed farming role after husband's illness; independently oversees land preparation and harvest.	30	Tandag

Prior to data collection, all participants were fully informed about the aims and scope of the study. Each received a participant information sheet and was asked to provide written informed consent, ensuring that their participation was voluntary and ethically sound. The primary method of data collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes per participant. These were conducted face-to-face in locations familiar to the women farmers, creating an environment that encouraged openness and comfort in sharing their experiences. With the consent of participants, each session was recorded using a mobile device as a backup, and full transcripts were later produced to preserve accuracy and detail. The interview guide was designed to explore women's lived experiences in agriculture, their perceptions of gender roles, and their decision-making responsibilities within farming households. Examples of the types of questions asked include "What is it like being a woman farmer in the agriculture industry?", "Do you think gender affects your opportunities in the agriculture industry?"

Data Analysis

This study employed qualitative thematic analysis to examine the lived experiences of women farmers. Data analysis began immediately after the first interview and continued alongside the data collection process, consistent with the iterative nature of qualitative inquiry. Conducting analysis concurrently allowed the researcher to engage with the material in depth and refine the interview guide as new insights emerged. For instance, after initial interviews, additional questions were incorporated, such as "What does feminism mean or not mean to you as a woman in agriculture?" and "Are religion and agriculture connected?" These questions reflected themes that arose spontaneously in participants' narratives, particularly regarding religion and perspectives on feminism, which later developed into key subthemes. The analytic process followed Creswell and Poth's (2016) Data Analysis Spiral, which conceptualizes analysis as a cyclical rather than linear activity. This framework involves organizing the data, writing analytic memos, generating initial codes, developing categories, interpreting meanings, and presenting findings (Poth, 2023). Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity, after which an initial set of 67 codes was identified. Examples included "work ethic," "leadership," "struggle for opportunity," "religion," "independence," "stereotypes," and "tradition." These codes were subsequently refined, clustered, and consolidated into five subthemes. The subthemes contributed to the construction of the overarching theme of Rural Feminism, which is elaborated upon in the findings. While the results are not intended to be generalizable, the analytic approach provides rich, contextually grounded insights into women's agricultural experiences, offering a sociological understanding of gender, labor, and decision-making in rural backgrounds.

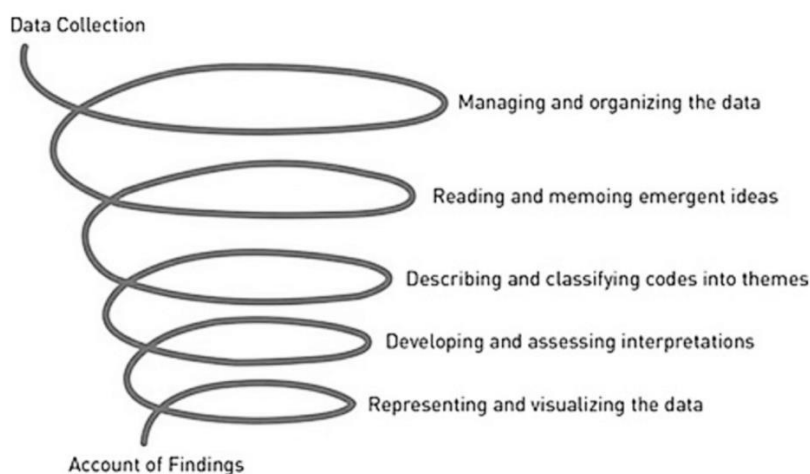


Figure 1. Data Analysis Spiral.

Ensuring the Rigor of the Research

It was ensured through four trustworthiness criteria and aligned with the principles of Carcary (2009). Credibility was established by prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources, and member checking to verify accuracy. Dependability was addressed by maintaining an audit trail and detailed documentation of data collection, coding, and analysis procedures. Confirmability was reinforced through reflexivity, acknowledgment of researcher bias, and grounding interpretations in participants' accounts. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of context, participants, and findings to allow applicability in comparable settings. These measures collectively strengthened the trustworthiness of the study.

RESULTS

The analysis of participant narratives generated five subthemes that capture the lived realities of women farmers in the Caraga region. These subthemes reflect the intersection of gender, culture, and agricultural practice, and together they contribute to the enunciation of a localized framework of feminist thought referred to in this study as Rural Feminism. The subthemes identified were: (1) women's ways of managing and sustaining farms, (2) faith and resilience expressed through Christianity, (3) persistence of traditional gender norms, (4) experiences of exclusion and inequality within farming communities, and (5) visions of a more equitable future for women in agriculture. Taken collectively, these subthemes not only document the voices of women farmers but also advance the conceptualization of Rural Feminism by demonstrating how gendered roles, gender-cultural expectations, and personal agency intersect in agricultural life. Rural Feminism, as constructed here, is grounded in the everyday practices and decision-making of women farmers who negotiate between structural constraints and opportunities within the agricultural sector.

Women's Way of Managing and Sustaining Farms

The analysis showed that participants understood their contribution through what they described as a "woman's touch." This concept combined maternal instincts with practical traits that shaped how farms were managed. Participants presented their approach as distinct from men's, in those women integrated care for household and community with agricultural production.

Woman Farmer 5 explained:

"We were strong-willed and passionate, but we did all that with a woman's touch, like a maternal instinct if you will. We did not even have to be mothers, but the woman's touch influenced everything. That maternal instinct shaped how we worked, how we approached tasks, and how we thought of farming. I think the woman's touch on things made woman farmers more influential. It shaped how we managed farms and how we approached business decisions."

Woman Farmer 2 stated:

"When men farm, a family ate good. When woman farmers farm, the community ate good. Woman farmers cared not only for their own household but also for others. We cared for the land in a different way, with a sense of nurturing. That was what made our farming valuable. It was not only for profit or for the family, but for the wider community that depended on it."

Woman Farmer 8 described the qualities that woman farmers needed in order to succeed in agriculture:

“Usually woman farmers had to have, working in the agricultural field in my opinion, a good sense of humor, a strong work ethic, somebody who took initiative to get stuff done, had a high interest, a positive attitude, liked working with other people, liked working with cattle, had respect for the land, just basic things like that. Again, being detail-oriented, communication skills, a lot of different things. I hoped there were more opportunities for woman farmers in all roles of agriculture.”

These accounts demonstrated that the “woman’s touch” was not a singular trait but a cluster of practices and orientations. For Woman Farmer 1, the maternal instinct structured her approach to farming and informed her role in agricultural management. For Woman Farmer 2, the difference lay in woman farmers’ orientation toward community well-being and stewardship of the land, which contrasted with the household-centered framing she attributed to men. For Woman Farmer 3, the emphasis was on professional competence and personal discipline, describing farming not as instinct alone but as a field requiring skills, resilience, and interpersonal capacity.

Together, these perspectives constructed a framework of Rural Feminism. The “woman’s touch” functioned as both a symbolic and practical marker of woman farmers’ roles. It represented an approach that balanced care with production, community with household, and instinct with structured labor practices. The participants’ narratives positioned woman farmers not as auxiliaries to male farmers but as central actors whose presence shaped agricultural sustainability, community nutrition, and farm management. This understanding located woman farmers’ labor as integral to both the social and productive dimensions of farming (Leach, 2014).

Faith and Resilience Expressed Through Christianity

Religion, particularly Roman Catholicism, shaped how woman farmers in the Caraga region approached farming and interpreted challenges in agricultural life. Faith informed their sense of resilience and provided a framework for decision-making in an environment marked by uncertainty.

Woman Farmer 4 explained:

“When the weather was bad, like drought or heavy rain, we prayed the rosary. We asked God to give us rain, then prayed again for the rain to stop so we could harvest. I believed that the Lord would provide no matter what. Farming depended on Him.”

Woman Farmer 5, who described herself as active in church activities, added:

“We grew up attending novenas and processions. It carried over to how we farmed. Every time we planted, we prayed for good harvest. Every time we harvested, we thanked God. Farming had many risks—floods, typhoons, pests. I relied on God to face those.”

Woman Farmer 6 expressed a similar view:

“I did not know any farmer in our place who was not Catholic. We relied on God because farming was uncertain. Sometimes the crops failed, sometimes they grew well. That was life. For me, farming and faith went together. Without prayer, we could not endure the work.”

The narratives indicated that Catholic practices were integrated into farming routines. Prayers, novenas, and thanksgiving rituals were performed before planting, during unpredictable weather conditions, and after harvests. Faith was not abstract; it was lived through rituals and collective expressions that structured how woman farmers responded to uncontrollable factors such as climate, pests, and market conditions.

The analysis demonstrated that Catholicism was not peripheral but central to the daily experience of woman farmers. Their statements positioned faith as a resource that allowed them to endure the risks of agriculture. It also reinforced communal ties, since religious observances were carried out collectively in barangays. Religion thus shaped Rural Feminism in the Caraga by linking resilience to Catholic devotion. Woman farmers constructed their agency not only in terms of labor and management but also in the belief that God sustained both their families and their land.

Persistence of Traditional Gender Norms

All participants in this study pointed to the traditional nature of agriculture in the Philippines and how these affected women farmers in multiple ways. Some participants described these traditions as “the usual roles in the family farm” or practices that remained because “people are still used to the old ways.” The negative effects were visible in how women farmers felt they were not always treated fairly or given the same level of respect as men farmers, even when they had equal or higher levels of education. Several participants had completed agricultural degrees or attended government training programs, but this did not alter how they were perceived within their communities.

Woman Farmer 1 explained:

“Even if I finished agriculture courses and attended trainings, people do not always take me seriously. In our cooperative meetings, they still listen more to men. They think because I am a woman, I should not be driving the tractor or handling fertilizer decisions. It hurts because I actually know the process better than some of them, but the respect is never the same.”

Woman Farmer 2 reflected:

“I grew up doing farm work, so I know the hardships. But when I expressed interest in joining a cattle project, one elder told me, ‘You will not last there. You are a woman. You should find office work instead.’ For me, this was a ceiling already placed on me because of my gender. I do not see why women cannot do what men do. These ceilings are invisible but real. No matter how you prove yourself, they treat you as less capable.”

The accounts revealed how cultural traditions continue to guide expectations of what tasks are appropriate for men and women. Women farmers often described being encouraged toward bookkeeping, marketing, or support roles, while men were more readily associated with heavy equipment and decision-making in production. These practices did not reflect lack of ability but rather longstanding views of gendered responsibilities within rural communities.

At the same time, the narratives showed how women consistently exercised agency within these circumstances. They managed farms, operated machinery, and pursued training opportunities to strengthen their knowledge. By doing so, they expanded the meaning of what women could achieve in agriculture and gradually redefined community perceptions of farming roles. Rural Feminism in this sense is visible in their persistence, as they engage directly with traditional norms while continuing to affirm their place as farmers and decision-makers (Farhall & Rickards, 2021). Their experiences demonstrate that the strength of women farmers lies not only in sustaining agricultural work but also in steadily reshaping the expectations of rural life. Their resistance revealed the structural dimension of Rural Feminism, where inequality was not personal but systemic, arising from entrenched gender norms and cultural definitions of agricultural labor. Rural Feminism emerged as both a critique of tradition and a practice of resistance. It exposed how women farmers lived within a system that undervalued them yet claimed space, authority, and recognition (Leach, 2014). Their accounts demonstrated that Rural Feminism was not abstract but alive in their labor, persistence in male-dominated environments, and insistence on recognition as farmers in their own right.

Experiences of Exclusion and Inequality within Farming Communities

The narratives of women farmers revealed that negative encounters with men in agriculture existed, but these did not define the entirety of their experiences. Women consistently described their interactions as a mix of exclusion and support, where discriminatory remarks coexisted with encouragement from men who valued their presence. This duality shaped a distinct component of Rural Feminism, as women negotiated their position within a system that both marginalized and sustained them.

Woman Farmer 4 explained:

“You know, I’ve run into things in the past, like you always run into it. So, this or, this or that way, you know but that’s not the majority of the folks we run into... So, I mean you have stuff like that, but we got so many good people in our industry I would have a hard time saying, you know, that was the attitude of everybody.”

Woman Farmer 7 recounted how support from men was intertwined with gender expectations:

“Then, there’s also, there’s also some [men] that are so proud of you for like paving the way because like, especially if they have daughters. If they have daughters, then they see it as like if she can do it, my kid can do it kind of deal. But I’ve definitely had both ends of the spectrum of like being taken advantage of because you’re a woman and being very respected because you’re, your kind of not falling into the mold of everything.”

These accounts demonstrated that women farmers did not experience agriculture as a uniformly hostile environment, nor as a uniformly supportive one. Instead, they navigated a spectrum of interactions where gender operated as both a constraint and a resource. Rural Feminism in this sense accounted for contradiction. It acknowledged that women were not simply excluded by patriarchal structures but were also validated, especially when men viewed them through familial ties such as being a daughter, wife, or granddaughter. The presence of “good men” in their stories reflected not the absence of inequality but the conditions under which women gained partial acceptance in male-dominated spaces.

The analysis showed that support from men did not erase structural barriers. It was conditional, mediated by kinship ties and gendered respectability. Women described how recognition came when men saw them as extensions of their daughters or families, suggesting that legitimacy depended on relational identities rather than independent authority. At the same time, their testimonies revealed that negative treatment persisted through skepticism, harassment, or the redirection of women into peripheral roles. These contradictory experiences featured how Rural Feminism exposed the limits of acceptance, revealing that recognition in agriculture remained fragile, contingent, and gendered (Leder, 2022).

Visions of a More Equitable Future for Women in Agriculture

The women farmers described their experiences not only in terms of present challenges but also through their expectations for the future of agriculture. They expressed a consistent desire to see more women in leadership,

management, and policy positions within agricultural organizations and cooperatives. Their narratives underscored that participation should not remain limited to support roles or peripheral tasks but extend into decision-making spaces where authority and recognition were consolidated. They noted that while the presence of women in agriculture had grown, structural and cultural barriers persisted in shaping how women were positioned in both farm labor and leadership.

Woman Farmer 3 stated:

“I mean, there’s a lot of opportunity. There really is. There’s so much being done; the future is just bright. The future for women overall is very bright in agriculture...I’d also love to see a new generation of women step up and take hold, you know, and start these farms.”

Woman Farmer 4 explained:

“I think there’s going to be a lot more women leaders in agriculture, because they see that women are getting more traction on the larger stages in the ag industry in general...I think there’s a brighter future for women in ag because right now women in ag are paving the way for it to be, not easier, but just more of a path for success.”

The analysis indicated that the women framed their aspirations within a vision of Rural Feminism where recognition required both visibility and authority. While they viewed future involvement as expanding, they acknowledged that traditional divisions of labor persisted. Several women observed that men remained associated with manual fieldwork, while women were relegated to marketing, documentation, and organizational tasks. This division reflected cultural assumptions about physical ability and gendered suitability rather than objective measures of competence. Rural Feminism, in this context, exposed how expectations around labor organization served as a mechanism for reproducing gender hierarchies even as the numerical presence of women increased. The women also articulated that mentorship and collective support among women farmers were central to shifting these boundaries. Training programs, peer-to-peer learning, and cooperative initiatives were described as interventions that enabled women to acquire technical competence, from machinery operation to livestock handling, areas historically reserved for men (Little, 2015). These practices directly contested symbolic exclusion by positioning women as capable practitioners in the full range of agricultural labor.

Their testimonies also raised the issue of institutional access. Women expressed that organizational recognition and state-level leadership positions remained dominated by men. The accounts suggested that future equality depended not only on individual persistence but on the integration of women into policymaking spaces where agricultural priorities and funding were determined. The call for women in leadership roles illustrated how Rural Feminism extended beyond the farm level into structural and institutional dimensions (Anderson, 2022). The analysis therefore concluded that the women envisioned a future where their authority was not conditional but institutionalized. Rural Feminism in this context functioned both as critique and as aspiration, identifying barriers while outlining strategies for greater representation and recognition.

Cultural Rural Feminism

The accounts of participants described Cultural Rural Feminism as a framework shaped by the lived realities of women farmers and the cultural practices of rural life. This framework reflected independence and complementarity, as women asserted their capacity to manage agricultural work while situating their labor within traditions, faith, and cooperative relations with men. Cultural Rural Feminism departed from mainstream feminist narratives that stressed individual emancipation or adversarial politics. Participants expressed reluctance to adopt formal feminist labels, not from rejection of gender equality, but because their experiences of empowerment operated through cultural norms and community-based values. Cultural Rural Feminism presented a localized form of feminist practice that situated women’s contributions and negotiations of power within agricultural and cultural contexts.

Woman Farmer 1 described this position during her hiring experience:

“When I interviewed for my position, I was the first female [position]. I interviewed with a group of men, and since they couldn’t approach the topic of my gender, I did. I said, ‘If you have concerns about me being a female, then don’t hire me. Can I do this job? Yes. Can I do it well? Yes.’”

Faith and tradition also shaped many perspectives. Several participants viewed the differences between men and women as natural and complementary rather than limiting. Religion influenced how some defined equality—not as sameness, but as distinct strengths that both genders contribute to agriculture. As Woman Farmer 2 reflected:

“I am of the belief that we were created to be equals with men, but also, we have our separate roles. We complement each other in ways that increase creativity in the ag industry and allow for different points of view. Not being a feminist to me means I am not shutting men out, but recognizing that we can work together.”

Other participants connected their views on Rural Feminism to their sense of agency and the rejection of rigid definitions of feminism. Some explained that they preferred to show strength through their work rather than through labels. Woman Farmer 3 explained:

“Yes, I’m proud to be a woman. I’m proud to be a woman in the agriculture industry that is predominantly dominated by men, and I’m not going to back down...but I’m not going to go to the extreme. For me, it is about balance—showing that women can lead without having to fight with men all the time.”

The synthesis of these narratives shows that Rural Feminism is not about confrontation but about redefining strength in agricultural spaces. Women farmers demonstrated resilience by entering leadership positions, managing farms, and organizing networks, but they also expressed respect for traditions, religion, and gender complementarity. This makes Rural Feminism unique: it resists exclusion without rejecting cultural values. It frames equality not as sameness but as recognition of capability, responsibility, and voice (Fink, 2024). At the same time, the reluctance to adopt the feminist label illustrates how rural women negotiate between global discourses of feminism and their local contexts. This negotiation is itself a form of resistance and adaptation, revealing that Rural Feminism is both a critique of established gender roles and a practice of balancing independence with community norms.

DISCUSSION

This research asked: What are the experiences of women farmers and the impact of gender in production agriculture within the Caraga Region of the Philippines? Through eight in-depth interviews, analyzed using Creswell and Poth’s (2016) Data Analysis Spiral, five subthemes were identified and brought together under one surrounding theme: Cultural Rural Feminism.

Cultural Rural Feminism, as revealed in this study, features how women farmers in Caraga both embrace traditional roles and assert their capacity in the male-dominated sphere of agriculture. Unlike conventional feminist narratives centered on resistance to coercion, the women in this study expressed a belief in complementarity; acknowledging biological and physical differences between men and women while affirming their ability to manage farms, sustain livelihoods, and contribute equally to agricultural production (Leder, 2022). This reflects findings from international scholarship, but with distinct cultural tinges established in Philippine rural life.

For many participants, farming was not only labor but an extension of family and community life. Several reported managing both domestic and agricultural work, which demonstrated how caregiving and production intersected (Farhall, 2021). They did not describe this as a burden but as part of their identity as women farmers. One participant stated, “We may carry the household and the farm at the same time, but it is how we live. It makes us strong.” These accounts supported the concept of Cultural Rural Feminism in Caraga, which was not centered on rejecting tradition but on redefining it in ways that elevated women’s roles in sustaining agricultural communities.

Spirituality also emerged as a central element. Consistent with Chu et al. (2025), women farmers in Caraga linked farming practices to religious values and beliefs. For many, farming was described as both livelihood and vocation. One farmer stated, “The land is not ours; it is entrusted to us by God, and our role is to care for it and provide through it.” Another explained, “When we plant, we pray; when we harvest, we thank God. Without faith, there is no strength to continue.” These accounts showed that agricultural work was framed not only as economic activity but as religious duty situated within community life.

Christianity, particularly Catholic traditions, structured how women farmers interpreted contributions, responsibilities, and resilience in addressing challenges such as climate variability and market instability. Religious practices such as blessing seeds before planting and offering harvests through thanksgiving rituals integrated spirituality into agricultural routines. Women farmers reported that these practices defined the meaning of their labor and reinforced collective identity within farming communities.

The concept of Cultural Rural Feminism included religion as a dimension within agricultural values. Cultural Rural Feminism in Caraga encompassed gendered labor relations and the spiritual order through which women framed agency. Faith structured women’s understanding of obligation, perseverance, and stewardship of land. Spirituality functioned as a cultural force that legitimized women’s authority within rural households and communities. It also provided a language through which women expressed resilience against structural inequities and environmental risks. Through this integration of spirituality, Cultural Rural Feminism in Caraga departed from secular feminist frameworks that analyzed agriculture primarily through labor, class, or market participation. Women’s empowerment in rural contexts was mediated through cultural and religious traditions that affirmed their roles and contributions. One participant explained, “We farm because it is God’s will for us to provide food. That is why we endure, even if the land is hard and the market is unfair.”

Networking and solidarity also formed key strategies for women farmers. Despite systemic inequalities in access to land, credit, and training, participants reported the importance of forming relationships with other farmers, women's organizations, and cooperatives. One stated, "In farming, you cannot stand alone. You need others to learn, to share, and to survive." This aligned with feminist discourse on collective action but remained grounded in rural and community-based forms of support.

Taken together, these findings demonstrated that the concept of Cultural Rural Feminism in Caraga was distinct yet connected to international scholarship on women in agriculture. It acknowledged gender differences without framing them as limitations, incorporated spirituality as a core component of farming identity, and reinforced resilience through community ties. This perspective addressed a gap in feminist studies by showing how women farmers in the Philippines constructed their own narratives of agency and contribution within a gendered agricultural context.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of women farmers in the Caraga Region and examined how gender influences agricultural production. The interviews revealed that while women continue to course unequal access to resources and recognition, they actively redefine their role through resilience, community engagement, and faith-based perspectives. The central theme of Rural Feminism demonstrates that women farmers do not necessarily adopt feminist labels but symbolize a localized form of empowerment that integrates tradition, spirituality, and agricultural labor.

Research Implications

The implications of this study extend to agricultural development policies and gender inclusion programs. Recognizing women farmers not only as contributors but as leaders can reshape how resources, training, and support systems are designed. Education and extension services should integrate gender-sensitive approaches that value both traditional knowledge and scientific expertise. Moreover, strengthening women's cooperatives and agricultural networks can expand opportunities for collective growth. The experiences of women farmers in Caraga region bring out a form of Rural Feminism that is both socially engrained and forward-looking. It withstands that the sustainability of Philippine agriculture depends on recognizing the central role of women, not only as farmers but also as leaders of rural life.

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