

Feministische Geo-RundMail

Informationen rund um feministische Geographie

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Theme Issue

**Feminist Research Practice in Geography:
Snapshots, Reflections, Concepts**

Dear readers

We started planning this theme issue not without concerns about its timing. An ongoing pandemic that kept thwarting all kinds of plans and causing much extra stress (amongst other things) for many, a submission deadline in mid-summer, a topic that's not exactly amongst the latest academic trends: would this be a worthwhile project and the right moment to invite fellow researchers to join the conversation? In the end, we decided to send out the call and see how it would resonate with potential authors. Well, it did—to a degree that went far beyond our expectations. Declarations of interest and later manuscripts began to pile up in our inboxes. Some of the authors sent their contributions while being on holidays, in the final phases of writing their thesis or research grant proposal, while moving between countries, being swamped with many other tasks or facing personal challenges. And they invested time and efforts not for some high profile academic journal, but the absolutely-great-but-not-so-high-profile Feministische GeoRundmail.

We think this tells us something about the role of research practice, particularly fieldwork, in “our” academic debates and routines. We understand these manifold responses as signs of a prevalent desire to share research experiences and reflections, and to be part of and contribute to conversations about fieldwork as a social practice with ethical and political implications. This seems remarkable to us, for different reasons. First, because – as diagnosed by many – the exciting but often bumpy process of conducting fieldwork is mostly side-lined in academic writing and rarely gets much attention in collective and institutionalized forms of exchange. Second, because this desire to share encompasses issues and stories that are often regarded as difficult, uncomfortable, unwanted or “too personal” in the academy: reflections on unresolved and maybe unresolvable tensions, on plans not working out, feelings of frustration and failure, questions of power and privilege, or a sense of falling back behind one's own or others' expectations.

Contributions in this issue go beyond sharing joy and struggles in fieldwork. They link their situated observations and experiences to sophisticated reflections on research politics and ethics, power relations, and the possibilities and limits of engaged feminist research. They also link them to a wide range of debates and literatures which they introduce as rich sources of inspiration and help. While a sense of solitude and individualization is amongst the common themes and discomforts described in the contributions assembled here (and no uncommon one, as many of us will testify), we think that they also already indicate imperfect but important steps to transcend it: By sharing stories, they

demonstrate the value of doing so. And by relating to existing debates—often in other disciplines, on other continents, or in other language-communities—they demonstrate how much each of us can learn from what has already been written on feminist fieldwork practice, politics and ethics. This reveals, once again, the importance of feminist contributions to these debates—including the crucial contributions by queer, trans*, intersectional, and Black feminists and feminists of colour.

At the same time, the contributions demonstrate that knowledge about what we can do with fieldwork, and what fieldwork does with us, does not simply pile up and we shouldn't expect to have it all available at some point. New research issues, struggles for social justice and political awareness, new technologies and new kinds of research encounters and styles call for new approaches. They generate questions and situations that won't lend themselves to readymade solutions, but rather require reflection, negotiation, and sometimes trail-and-error modes of moving forward. Contributors to this theme issue are seeking responsible and meaningful strategies and responses to such challenges and demonstrate how we can develop them by way of collective and critical exchange. Feminist and intersectional theories help us to better understand the relationship between positionalities and complex entanglements in power structures in research situations, the importance of situated accounts and knowledges, and the possibilities and limits of various forms of articulation and agency. They thereby provide important tools for such personal and collective journeys.

In such a spirit of moving things forward in emancipatory and meaningful ways, contributions in this issue emphasize creative research styles and forms of collaboration, communication and intervention—both as a way of dealing with problems and as a fun and fulfilling way to make use of the freedoms and possibilities that we enjoy as students and researchers, deploying feminist accounts of engaging with and respectfully acknowledging different types and modes of knowledge production. Not less creative, some contributions highlight personal instances of self-reflexivity, empathy and flexibility in research settings and provide many inspiring examples for how these can be turned into new ways of feminist collaborative practice. These intimate examples of dealing with and overcoming conundrums and disruptions during or after fieldwork, induced by power asymmetries, disruptive research encounters or the need to reorganising research due to a global pandemic, are undoubtedly helpful and encouraging. We hope they will provide some

guidance, inspirations and facilitate new alliances in and beyond these troubling times.

We are glad that researchers in various positions, from students to senior colleagues, have contributed to this theme issue and think that such dialogue across status groups is indeed much needed to develop and reflect **feminist research in practice**. We clustered the many beautiful and powerful contributions in five distinct but also interrelated themes of

interest, and hope that readers will enjoy and benefit from the reflections assembled herein. Last but not least, we would like to express our gratitude to all who contributed to this issue!

Sarah Klosterkamp & Alexander Vorbrugg

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V: Translations between theory and practice - creating spaces of exchange

Feminist research in practice – Reflections on a transdisciplinary research seminar on the topic of care farming during the COVID-19 pandemic

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In the spring semester of 2020, a transdisciplinary research seminar was held at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies (ICFG) at the University of Bern.⁴¹ A group of fifteen Master's students from various disciplines (including geography, history, social anthropology and sociology) took an in-depth look at questions of gender relations and sustainable development in care farming in the Swiss context. In the German-speaking region in particular, care farming refers to the paid care of children, young people and adults provided in an agricultural setting. Foster families offer a home, meaningful activities, a daily routine and, depending on the needs of the guests, special therapy and educational services. The target group includes people with physical or psychological impairments, drug addiction, or dementia (cf. Bombach/Stohler/Wydler 2015; Driest 2006; Häberli/Amacker/Funke/Graf 2017). In Switzerland, around one percent of farms were already providing care services in 2010 (Gairing/Wydler 2010). Depending on the setting, care can be offered to adults and/or minors; for example, in the canton of Berne, 60% of foster children are already being cared for by farming families (cf. Häberli/Amacker/Funke/Graf 2017). According to Häberli, Amacker, Funke and Graf (2017), care farming can be seen as an interface between two social areas – care work and agriculture. Both fields have been in a state of crisis for some time. On the one hand, there is the care crisis, which is manifesting itself in an ageing society and thus in a growing demand for care services with simultaneously rising costs (cf. Knobloch 2013); on the other hand, farms in Switzerland are exposed to fierce competition and are under increasing economic and social pressure as it becomes increasingly difficult to earn a living from agricultural work (cf. Fluder/Contzen/Neukomm/Genoni 2009). Hence, as farmers look for opportunities to generate additional income, care farming represents an increasingly important diversification strategy (cf. Hassink/Grin/Hulsink 2012). Due to traditional role

models and a relatively strict gender-specific division of labour, women still bear most of the responsibility for care farming services, and female farmers who provide care have to cope with a variety of burdens and a high workload (cf. Fankhauser/Graf/Sancar 2014). Overall, care farming in Switzerland represents a very heterogeneous field, with many actors and a wide range of services, and it is becoming increasingly significant. Nevertheless, little research has been conducted on this topic to date (cf. Bombach/Stohler/Wydler 2015; Häberli/Amacker/Funke/Graf 2017).

This short introduction into the field of care farming shows that there is still a research gap, and that the topic has a gender dimension. Hence, the inclusion of care farming practitioners is needed to develop knowledge for developing practical solutions. To address these requirements, the lecturers for this seminar chose to adopt a feminist approach, with Feminist Standpoint Theory as the theoretical position and the transdisciplinary method for generating research results. Feminist Standpoint Theory assumes that research is not neutral, but rather shaped by the social position (positionality) of researchers; thus, power relations influence the production of knowledge. The basic purposes of Feminist Standpoint Theory are to make visible the experiences of suppressed social groups and to analyse power relations and their effects (cf. Harding 2004). This approach created space for the students to discuss their own positionality in relation to their disciplines and to the research topic. Furthermore, transdisciplinary research is becoming increasingly popular – especially with regard to questions of sustainability research – as it promotes the involvement of actors from outside academia in the research process in order to integrate knowledge from practitioners and relevant stakeholders and to tackle real-world-problems central to the field of investigation. Ideally, in a transdisciplinary research project, practitioners and relevant stakeholders will be involved in the research process from beginning to end – from the development of the research question, through the data collection process, joint data evaluation and the discussion of the research results, to the implementation of measures that contribute to the solution of real-world problems (cf. Lang et al. 2012). Thus, a transdisciplinary approach is very fruitful from a feminist per-

⁴¹ Further information about the seminar can be found [here](#).

spective because it opens the dialogue between the different research disciplines and the researched persons (in this case, farming families), and creates space for reflection on power relations and the participants' position in the research process.

In light of the time and space limitations of the seminar and the already high demands on the students, the ideal-typical model of transdisciplinary research was deviated from by including practitioners and relevant stakeholders in the process of developing the research question and by discussing the results with them. The research and data evaluation process, on the other hand, was left entirely to the students. Broadly, the seminar structure was as follows: In the first seminar units, the students received an introduction to care farming, theoretical input on the dimensions of sustainability and Feminist Standpoint Theory, and familiarisation with the principles of transdisciplinary research and the qualitative methods of social research. The students then formed interdisciplinary working groups of two or three people; these groups remained unchanged throughout the seminar. During the introduction session, the positionalities of the students and farmers, as well as questions concerning how to interact with the people involved were raised and discussed in great detail. After the basic introduction, two consecutive seminar sessions were planned for attendance by practitioners – people who are or were active in the field of care farming – to discuss the challenges and problems in the field. The working groups prepared questions from the literature for these sessions, and the experts from the field then presented their views on their everyday work and their positions in the field. This session brought together empirical and practical knowledge, and the discussion was held under a gender lens, as practitioners were invited to share their experiences regarding gender specific division of labour, traditional role models and income disparities, for example.

However, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the semester timetable; the impact of the pandemic became clear after the first session with the practitioners, and it was impossible to hold further face-to-face meetings. This meant the second session with the practitioners had to be cancelled, which immediately affected the research process as fewer voices and perspectives from the practitioners could be taken into account in finding research questions, therefore the students had to rely on the exchanges from the first session to set their research focus. Out of the first discussions, the working groups developed their gender-sensitive research questions, which were aimed at, among other things, work

structures, services provided, gender equality, and the experiences of host families in collaborating with actors in the care farming sector. The following sessions of the seminar were conducted in a digital classroom via Zoom software. The lecturers also facilitated learning videos, with the help of which the students were able to acquire the necessary knowledge through self-study and to review what they had already learned. In subsequent meetings, the students developed a research exposé and data collection instruments, which they discussed with their lecturers. One of the main challenges for the students was the interviews themselves, as only a few participants had previous experience in data collection. Due to the progressing pandemic, the interviews also had to be conducted digitally instead of on the families' farms as originally planned, which would have been a great opportunity to get to know them personally and observe the farms. As not all host families had the technical infrastructure to be interviewed digitally, some interviews were conducted by telephone and one took place face-to-face, with strict security measures to protect the health of the people involved. Ten families were interviewed in total – mainly female farmers, but, in two cases, the interview was with both a female and male farmer. All interviews were conducted with farming families who provide care services in addition to their farming businesses. The subsequent data evaluation process was based on the Grounded Theory method (for further information, see Corbin/Strauss 2008) and supported by the evaluation software MAXQDA. Following the interviews, data evaluation, poster creation and the presentation of the posters were again conducted in the digital classroom. Unfortunately, the final discussion with the practitioners eventually also fell victim to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the cancellation of the discussion round represented a further reduction of the transdisciplinary approach, it was all the more pleasing that the exchange between the research groups and the interview partners was very constructive. Not all groups were able to make quick contact with their interview partners, and the pitfalls of gaining access to the field and of conducting interviews were repeatedly the subject of joint reflection in the seminar. The interviews themselves were mostly perceived as dynamic as the farmers reported very openly about their everyday experiences. While some interviews followed a strict question-answer pattern, on other occasions discussions about the state of research arose in contrast to the life experiences of the interviewees. For example, these discussions confirm the findings of previous studies (cf. Fankhauser/Graf/Sancar 2014) that women continue to take on by far the greater part of care work,

and that this comes along with an additional burden. This is because female farmers report that care farming services have a major impact on paid work as well as unpaid (care) work. By offering care services, the woman's paid work is increasingly transferred to the private sphere in order to combine paid labour and domestic work. This results in additional workload for women, and the opening of their own private space to care services makes it more and more difficult to distinguish between paid work and private family life. Nonetheless, their shared experiences also imply that there is a slight tendency towards a fairer labour division between both genders because men tend to invest more time in care work as they integrate predominantly male clients into agricultural work. Here, again, the division of care work follows the traditional distribution in terms of exterior or interior space: agricultural work is assigned to men, while the female sphere is assigned to the domestic space. There are also changes in the demanding care work. For example, farmers perceive care work as increasingly stressful and challenging, which is due on the one hand to rising demands on the quality of work in general, but also to the increasingly demanding clients. In view of these challenges, many foster families perceive professional skills and knowledge in care professions as beneficial for their care work. Moreover, the cooperation between care families and care service companies has improved over the last few years. Most host families who cooperate with these intermediary organisations consider the provided support to be very central to their work, especially with regard to clarifying which care settings are suitable for which clients, and concerning the provision of valuable support in crisis situations. In this sense, the cooperation is perceived as equal and transparent. Remuneration for family care services has also shown an upwards trend in recent years, even if farmers feel that the pay is still too low considering the demanding and considerably stressful nature of the work involved. Overall, the interviewed foster families are increasingly self-confident and willing to change partner organisations if they are not satisfied with the services provided and/or their remuneration.⁴²

So, what are the potentials and limitations of such a project? In accordance with the transdisciplinary research paradigm, and taking into account Feminist Standpoint Theory, such a project allows a strong inclusion of the voices and experiences of practitioners, and it provides a space of exchange and reflection for both academics and

practitioners. While the interviewed farmers did not consider themselves a marginalized group, they very much welcomed the rare opportunity to share their experiences and to discuss challenges and transformations in the field of care farming. In this sense, they widely regarded and appreciated the project as relevant, even though, due to the limitations of the project, the research results could not be directly implemented into the field to tackle real-world-problems. From a lecturer's point of view, the example of the care farming sector is a good illustration of how time-consuming the planning and implementation of the research project can be when access to the field is difficult: although contacts to the field already existed, it took a great deal of time to secure ten families for interviews. Access to the field was made even more difficult by the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, as not all interview partners had the technical prerequisites for digital interviews. At the same time, the physical integrity of all participants was paramount, which meant direct interviews could only be conducted with the utmost caution and under difficult conditions. Hence, for future projects of this kind, it seems therefore advisable to choose a field of research in which access to the target group is guaranteed and digital research methods can be applied without difficulty. With regard to the shared experiences of the students, they made intensive use of reflexion offers, as well as discussions on their position in the field, their power, and their responsibilities as researchers. Thus, overall, most students considered the project to be an instructive and valuable experience. Nonetheless, they also considered the workload to be quite challenging, especially those who had never done research themselves. Since learning research methods in addition to conducting challenging research already places great demands on the students, it seems advisable for a research seminar to fall back on subject areas that are already known to the students or at least quite accessible to them. Moreover, from a lecturer's point of view, a limitation of the number of participants for a project of this kind is highly recommended as this allowed the groups to be offered enhanced support, even though the supervision via online meetings worked very well due to committed students and the manageable number of groups. All in all, despite the uncertainties that occurred, and in view of the fruitful discussions and the exciting research, it is fair to assume that the seminar was instructive for the majority of the participants, and that the transdisciplinary research approach

⁴² To further illustrate the research projects, one of the posters is attached to this article as example. All posters have been accepted for display at the *4th International Conference on Women in Agriculture*, which will take place at the University of Bern in spring 2022. Originally, the

conference was scheduled for 20-22 January 2021, but it was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

and the inclusion of Feminist Standpoint Theory provide a rich ground for exciting and successful projects. In this sense, we would like to encourage our readers to participate in transdisciplinary research projects, as knowledge of transdisciplinary approaches, exchange with practitioners, and reflection on feminist theory and methodology offer many valuable insights and perspectives that would otherwise be denied in studies.



Figure 1: Students' Poster. A high resolution version is available [online](#).

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Imprint

Die *feministische Geo-RundMail* erscheint vier Mal im Jahr. Inhaltlich gestaltet wird sie abwechselnd von Geograph_innen mit Interesse an Genderforschung in der Geographie, die (fast alle) an verschiedenen Universitäten des deutschsprachigen Raums arbeiten. Beiträge und Literaturhinweise können an die aktuellen Herausgeber_innen gesandt werden, deren Kontaktdaten in dem jeweils aktuellen Call hinterlegt sind.

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