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EDITORIAL

# Farming wellbeing through and beyond COVID-19: Stressors, gender differences and landscapes of support

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## Abstract

Although there has been a recent surge in research on drivers of poor farmer wellbeing and mental health, there is still a limited understanding of the state of wellbeing in farming communities around the world and how it can be best supported. This special issue seeks to extend our knowledge of how a combination of

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different stressors can challenge the wellbeing of farmers, farming families and farm workers, as well as how negative impacts can be unevenly distributed between different individuals. We advance the state of the art in research on farmer wellbeing, illustrating how social, economic and environmental policy drivers combine to create multiple points of stress, which are experienced differently by different individuals (e.g., age, gender). We move beyond an exploration of stressors towards a consideration of how landscapes of support for farmer wellbeing, and packages of support interventions, can improve the social resilience of farming communities. To be effective, these landscapes of support need to be accessible, well-funded, joined-up, and adaptable to evolving crises. This special issue explores farmer wellbeing in the context of global agricultural transitions, which are demanding new ways of farming (e.g., digitalisation, net zero, economic restructuring), and in light of shock events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in four countries—Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the US. In exploring the impacts of future shock events and agricultural transitions on wellbeing, the issue concludes with a call to move beyond broad compilations of stressors and interventions and towards nuanced investigations of why and how poor farmer wellbeing occurs and how it can be best supported in specific contexts. The research from these four countries has wide relevance across European countries (similarity in farming systems, noting some differences), but a key message from the issue is that stressors on farmer wellbeing can be highly context-dependent according to place-based social, environmental, economic and political issues.

**KEYWORDS**
farmer, help-seeking, mental health, wellbeing

## INTRODUCTION

In this editorial, we refer to the overarching concept of 'farmer wellbeing'. Defined by the World Health Organisation, wellbeing refers to a 'state in which an individual can realise their own

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potential, cope with normal stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community' (Nicholas, 2019, p. ii). Many of the articles in this special issue refer specifically to mental health/wellbeing. With specific reference to mental health, previous research has suggested that some farmers around the world, who are essential workers providing food and environmental stewardship, are struggling (Yazd et al., 2019; Younker & Radunovich, 2022). Whilst the picture is not fully clear (Chiswell, 2022), research has suggested that the number of farmers struggling with stress, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation may be on the rise (Rose et al., 2022) or at least that it is a widespread problem (Wheeler & Lobley, 2022). Furthermore, the issue is not only confined to principal farmers but also affects members of the wider farming family and farm workers (Wheeler et al.,, 2023). Despite the recent rise in global research on this issue, we still lack a nuanced understanding of the stressors affecting poor mental wellbeing and of the support landscapes and interventions needed to improve the situation. This collection builds on previous literature and addresses research gaps on drivers of poor wellbeing, gender impacts and support landscapes, with many of the studies using either the COVID-19 pandemic or wider agricultural transitions (de Boon et al., 2021) as examples of shock or disruptive events challenging farmer wellbeing. The (after-effects of the) COVID-19 pandemic, alongside other shock events such as cost of production and animal health crises, are playing out in farming communities undergoing policy transitions. In the quest to produce more food, whilst reducing negative impacts on the environment and sustaining livelihoods, farmers around the world are being asked to transition towards new forms of agriculture (de Boon et al., 2021); for example, using more technology, embracing regenerative principles or even being forced to close down to satisfy net zero or water pollution targets. From the UK, to the Netherlands, to India and elsewhere, these transitions are often controversial and place additional stress on farmers and workers to adapt (de Boon et al., 2021). If we accept that people in farming around the world face regular periods of crisis, even 'permacrisis' (Shucksmith et al., 2023), caused by rapidly changing political and societal demands and environmental conditions, we need a clearer understanding of why and how poor health occurs and how positive wellbeing can be best supported.

## Stressors, gender differences and landscapes of support

### Stressors on wellbeing

All of the articles in this special issue explore the drivers of poor farmer wellbeing and mental health, with insights being drawn from empirical work in Ireland, New Zealand, the UK,[1] and the US. The first article by Wheeler et al. (2023) explores how loneliness and isolation affect farmer wellbeing. Wheeler et al. draw on their research with members of the agricultural community in England to present a new conceptual model of loneliness in farming, developing new understanding about how loneliness and associated mental health problems are experienced within this specific sociocultural context. They use findings from qualitative interviews and workshops with farmers, farm family members and farm support practitioners to explore the multidimensional nature of loneliness in relation to farming environments, cultures and identities, examining the characteristics and drivers of three distinct but overlapping types of loneliness that emerged in the narratives of their participants: social, emotional and cultural loneliness. The analysis identifies elements of farming culture and identity, such as attitudes towards 'hard work', familial expectations around farm succession and notions of farmers as stoic and self-reliant, as underlying the ways in which these forms of loneliness are experienced and managed on an individual

basis. The authors urge action from across society—including the government, public and farmers themselves—to address the issues identified and mitigate experiences of loneliness within agriculture. Their recommendations include promoting a culture change within the farming community around attitudes to work and time off, enhancing opportunities for public engagement with agriculture and improving the provision of tailored mental health services. The Farming Community Network, a farm support charity and partner in the research (represented by co-authors McCann and Phillimore), is already using the findings from this research to inform the support that they offer to farmers and farm family members across England and Wales.

The second article in this special issue (Carolan, 2023) reminds us that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside other shock events such as cost of production and animal health crises, are playing out in farming communities undergoing policy transitions, including shifts towards digitalisation (Fielke et al., 2022). Carolan (2023) connects the disparate literatures of critical digital agriculture studies, feminist affect scholarship (with indebtedness to Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant) and critical/classical agrarianism to tell a story about how Agriculture 4.0 technologies can act as 'cruel' happiness pointers. These platforms are shown to direct actors towards happiness while potentially accelerating the very conditions that produced the problems they are promising to solve. Highlighting conceptions of the good life that are fluid, contested and multiple, which have connections to sayings and doings associated with these platforms, the analysis makes visible norms and values animating the agro-digital revolution. The article leverages data from a study of smart farming applications in the US, collected through two focus groups and 55 personal interviews, which were conducted twice—pre- (2019) and post-COVID outbreak (2020 and 2021). Digital farming platforms are shown to feed into the anxieties of structural change with promises to resolve those tensions, while exacerbating the underlying tensions. The platforms are also shown to trouble traditional conceptions of agrarianism—for example, by reclassifying the value of hard work (where working smarter is 'better' than working harder). As for COVID-19, the data are clear: The pandemic was more about amplifying highlighted sayings, doings and feelings than about disrupting or redirecting them, though certain anxieties seem to have been especially elevated. The article concludes by reflecting on what agriculture might look like if there were fewer promises and more openness for unexpected possibilities. Thinking specifically about so-called disruptive innovation, the concepts of Responsible Innovation and FAIR principles (i.e. findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable) are reflected on as possible avenues to make agriculture less 'cruel'.

## Gender differences and COVID-19

The third article in this issue by Hammersley et al. (2023) also draws on ideas of 'good farming' and farming norms to explore societal expectations and agri-governance structures in farming, how they impact gendered roles and what the collateral impacts are on wellbeing and mental health. This study is framed within the context of farmers' identity and the gendered sociology of rural Ireland, drawing on Bourdieu's sociology of capitals and (plural) masculinities as an amalgamation of fluid qualities, behaviours, attitudes and endeavours within particular communities of shared interpretation and recognition that shift through time and across contexts. Through the use of focus groups with male beef and dairy farmers, findings suggest strong links between power structures, identity and economic mobility (or lack of), which is inextricably linked to farmers' sense of self and framed as a measure of how one farmer compares to another farmer in the wider context of '*good farmer*' ideals and patterns of behaviour. Hammerlsey et al. explore this

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issue by drawing out how contemporary regulation of farming practices gives rise to tensions associated with a perceived loss of masculine autonomy and mastery, as well as ripple effects on mental health. The authors conclude that farmers' mental health support in terms of research, policy and interventions must be informed by the sociocultural and political contexts within society and agriculture at large.

The fourth article by Budge and Shortall (2023) explores the gender dimension of farmer wellbeing from the perspective of women in the agricultural industry in the context of COVID-19. Focusing on the impacts of the pandemic in terms of their work and social life, their article fills the gap in the literature that traditionally focussed on the main farmer, usually the man, on family farms, by examining the difference in how men and women on these holdings were impacted by the pandemic. Their qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted in Scotland during the COVID-19 lockdowns. A key finding is the differential gendered impact. Men found the pandemic to be a generally positive experience, whereas women had largely negative experiences due to the regression of their equality, being largely expected to revert to traditional expectations of managing the increased domestic work and homeschooling. Therefore, future work regarding the mental health of men and women on farms needs to be considered when crises occur, as this impacts the family farm and different members of the family in varying ways.

The fifth article by O'Reilly et al. (2023) investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic affected farmers' mental health in Ireland. This is the first study to interview farmers in Ireland with the aim of investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their wellbeing. The border region of Ireland, a predominantly rural region that suffered a comparatively large number of COVID-19 cases and was subject to localized lockdowns was selected for this study. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions created challenges for farmers in operating their farm enterprises, and this included the closure of live auction marts. It also disrupted community interaction, increasing isolation, and posed a threat to the wellbeing of farmers. Features of farming life that farmers see as positive included green space, working with animals, working routine and the collaboration of family and friends in operating the farm. These positive features preceded the pandemic and came into focus in this period for the farmers interviewed and were seen to be protective of wellbeing. While the uptake of new technology was used to adapt to the challenges of COVID-19, the farmers interviewed saw the pandemic as attenuating social connections within rural communities. Future research is needed to investigate key sights of community interaction in rural Ireland and spaces such as marts that are under-researched but key for the social and occupational life of farmers. Policymakers need to consider how the pandemic has precipitated changes in rural life and culture, increasing reliance on technology, and the future impact this may have on wellbeing.

## Landscapes of support

The sixth article by Shortland et al. (2023) again uses the COVID-19 pandemic as a point of focus, but moves the debate past understanding drivers of poor farmer mental health, and towards an exploration of the 'landscapes of support' for it. By 'landscapes of support', the authors refer to the range of support sources available to farmers, including mental health charities, primary health care, chaplains and other faith groups, auction mart staff and people in rural communities and farmer/peer organisations. Whilst the body of literature on drivers of poor farmer wellbeing is growing, albeit many gaps remain (Chiswell, 2022), there are relatively few studies that explore how the different actors in these landscapes work together, how they adapt to crises and whether they are sufficiently structured to provide accessible and effective support. Using a mixed

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methods approach in the UK, the study found that support-giving organisations adapted to provide support differently during the pandemic but faced organisational challenges and constraints in the wider operating environment that limited the availability and accessibility of help for farmers. The article reflects on how further research and policy action can improve landscapes of support for farmer wellbeing, arguing that similar exercises to map and understand support landscapes should be conducted in other countries.

The final article by Knook et al. (2023) furthers our evaluation of support interventions for farmer wellbeing. The authors examine profitability, environmental and wellbeing change amongst farmers participating in a participatory extension programme (PEP) in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Their study applies a novel institutional logics framework to identify not only change in practices, beliefs and values underlying farm management but also the mechanisms and actors responsible for this change. The study was conducted in the Northland region of Aotearoa-New Zealand, and data collection involved interviews with 24 PEP participants. Three main findings derive from this study: (i) wellbeing is intrinsically linked to other sustainability challenges, such as profitability and environmental performance, and therefore the introduction of new values and practices around wellbeing needs to be balanced with other sustainability challenges; (ii) multi-actor involvement is key in establishing voluntary change amongst landowners, as change requires different support and ideas at different times and (iii) inclusion of values, beliefs and practices around a new topic such as wellbeing requires a 'safe' environment, to reduce pressure to conform to dominant values, beliefs and practices in the current farm management environment. This study firstly highlights the need for a pluralistic approach to fund wellbeing initiatives. Secondly, it highlights the importance of unpacking the linkages between wellbeing and other sustainability challenges, to identify how to best support mental wellbeing amongst farmers without compromising profitability and environmental performance.

## Further research

This issue has brought together scholars from four countries to share novel advances in understanding the stressors, gender differences and support landscape affecting farming wellbeing. Whilst we note a rise in research on farmer wellbeing in recent years (e.g., Hagen et al., 2019; Yazd et al., 2019), this issue sought to move past merely identifying stressors towards a more nuanced understanding of how they are spatially and temporally distributed across farming communities. We illustrate how farming wellbeing is context- and time-dependent, with the effects of a spatially unique set of policy instruments and societal norms associated with agricultural transitions pressuring farmers. We show that spatial differences in geography, as well as a whole host of farm- and family-specific contextual factors, have an impact on the varied ways in which loneliness, social isolation and associated mental health issues are experienced by farmers, workers and farming families. Furthermore, we illustrate how different types of individuals (e.g., male/female, young/old) are likely to experience distinctive pressures on their wellbeing, and this diversity therefore requires a pluralistic approach to providing support. Last, we highlight how shock events such as the COVID-19 pandemic always add to an existing set of pressures faced by people in farming and how a better understanding of landscapes of support for wellbeing can help us to build system resilience to provide help that is more accessible and available to farming communities.

It is clear, however, that in bringing forth this complexity, more research is needed to unpack these issues further. We still have limited information globally on how the wellbeing of different people in farming communities—for example, different genders, races, socioeconomic

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backgrounds, cultures, ages and access to digital tools—is affected by different stressors; or indeed, how a suite of interventions can be spatially targeted so that support can be accessed in ways that suit individuals. In exploring the impacts of future shock events and agricultural transitions on wellbeing, we should aim to move beyond broad compilations of stressors and interventions and towards nuanced investigations of why and how poor farmer wellbeing occurs and how, and by whom, it can be best supported in specific contexts. Given the stretched nature of formal health care in many places, further research on the role of skilled intermediaries in helping farmers is needed. Sharing lessons learned across Europe is important. Scope exists to broaden the work of the authors in this special issue to engage colleagues and policymakers working on farmer mental health throughout Europe, including ongoing Horizon Europe projects and conference sessions.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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## ENDNOTE

[1] Many of the articles focus specifically on constituent parts of the UK, such as Scotland or England. Agriculture and health are devolved issues in the UK, with England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland adopting their own policies.

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