



## Bringing 'invisible' side activities to light. A case study of rural female entrepreneurs in the Veenkoloniën, the Netherlands

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### A B S T R A C T

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Over the past 20 years, rural areas in Western societies have transformed from a production to a consumption space. Much research on rural diversification and revitalization has focused on farmers and their wives. However, it is useful to examine side activities run by non-farm women which have slowly emerged in the last few years. In view of discussions about rural decline, the value of such activities should be looked at in a new light. Although these activities may not significantly reverse unemployment figures, they have the potential to provide the social and emotional 'glue' to motivate a household to remain in declining areas as small-scale economic activities contribute to a better quality of life and a higher level of well-being. In this article we draw on the personal stories of women who undertake side activities in the Veenkoloniën, the Netherlands. We explore the factors that enable these women to start a side activity and the related organizational and emotional struggles they face while running such activities within the perimeter of their home. We further highlight the importance of side activities for the empowerment of women in rural households.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, rural areas in Western societies have undergone many changes as a result of socioeconomic restructuring. Increasing demands made by society on rural areas as sites for tourism and recreation as well as quality and regional food production have transformed the countryside from a (predominantly) production to a (predominantly) consumption space (Halfacree, 2006; Slee, 2005). As a result, the countryside has become a multi-functional space for leisure, recreation, working and living (EC, 2007; Marsden, 1999).

Although rural areas in the Netherlands are still dominated by agricultural land use, in general the developments just described are found here as well (SER, 2005; Steenbekkers et al., 2008).<sup>1</sup> In terms of land use, there has been a steady decrease in areas allocated for agriculture from the mid-1990s onwards. It is expected that agricultural land use will continue to decrease by another four percent by 2035 as more land is designated as nature and recreation areas

and more space utilized for housing (Steenbekkers et al., 2008). The Dutch population seems to view these developments with a sense of pragmatism. They are opposed to urbanization and the emergence of industrial zones, and a key concern is that the spacious landscape and its quietness are preserved. These characteristics are reflected in the regional identities of rural inhabitants as well as in visions and plans for rural revitalization which require the preservation of a region's rural identity in relation to its social and 'morphological sense' (Steenbekkers et al., 2008, p. 13). In terms of the emergence of new rural activities, for example, this implies that these activities should not alter the 'rural morphology'. An important question then is how rural areas can be revitalized in order to foster economically and socially viable living environments whilst keeping their visual qualities intact. It is likely that at least some endeavours will focus on the small(est) scale of activity which is relatively unobtrusive and/or enhances rural qualities.

With regard to the diversification of rural areas, it is useful to bring attention to those small-scale activities that have slowly emerged in the last few years. In light of discussions about rural decline (Haartsen and Venhorst, 2010), such activities should be valued more than they perhaps are at present. Although they do not matter much in terms of reversing unemployment figures (see Markantoni et al., 2011, forthcoming), they have the potential to provide the social and emotional 'glue' that will motivate a household to remain in a declining area as small-scale economic activities contribute to a better quality of life and a higher level of well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> The Agenda for a Living Countryside (LNV, 2004, p. 3) drawn up by the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality emphasizes that 'the countryside of the future will not just reflect the activity of farmers and other rural dwellers, it will reflect the activities and needs of all Dutch people'.

In this article then, we explore the local and social context of so-called side activities carried out by women who are not farmers in the northern Netherlands, specifically the Veenkoloniën, as well as the impact of these activities on women's personal lives. In the following section, we contextualize our research on side activities within the broader literature on female rural entrepreneurship in order to highlight similarities and differences. We then briefly describe the geographic setting for the research, and the methods adopted in this research. In the last part of the article, we discuss women's motives as well as enabling factors that are conducive to start-ups. In so doing, we highlight everyday organizational and emotional issues. We find that starting up side activities is tied to the geographical and personal context of the respondents and is embedded into their everyday (family and work) life.

## 2. Rural women and entrepreneurship

### 2.1. Types of female rural entrepreneurship

A body of literature that has emerged in recent years discusses the growing share of rural businesses initiated by women in rural areas, including Western European. This literature in particular emphasizes the pioneering role of women in new businesses in rural areas (Anthopoulou, 2010; Kloeze, 1999), and that women are at the forefront of the diversification (O'Toole and Macgarvey, 2003) and social rural revitalization of the rural economy (Little, 2002; Warren-Smith and Jackson, 2004). As is highlighted in the European Commission's report 'Women active in rural development' (EC, 2000, p. 13), women contribute to the development of rural communities as they 'often have the added advantage of an awareness and knowledge of local needs and special interpersonal and communications skills'.

A variety of rural businesses initiated by women can be identified in the literature. First, there are women living on farms who establish a business at the farmhouse (see, for example, Bock, 2004). These businesses are often driven by the economic necessity to diversify the farm income due to a decline in agriculture and they mainly include activities related to agro-tourism (McGehee et al., 2006), food processing, artisanal products and local agrofood production (Anthopoulou, 2010). In general, these women base their business on the farm and supplement the main income of the farm to a considerable degree. Women who are not farmers have also initiated rural businesses that are located away from home (see Tigges and Green, 1994) as well as businesses at home (see Oberhauser, 1995, 1997). In general, these businesses operate on a small scale and aim to generate a main source of income for the household or to supplement the main income to a significant degree. Oberhauser (1997) and Baylina and Schier (2002), for example, note that working from home is a necessary part of a household's income and Oberhauser (1995) even asserts that working from home is a crucial household survival strategy in rural areas, in particular remote rural areas, where there are high levels of unemployment and poverty (see Oberhauser, 1995, 1997). In contrast, the rural enterprises that we call side activities in the Netherlands are often situated in a context where people are more economically secure and the work/life balance is more flexible and desirable especially amongst women with young children (see Noback, 2011). Perhaps as a result of this, the motivation to start a side activity and its role in the context of rural development differs from the enterprises just described. In the following, we briefly outline our definition of side activities in this research.

Markantoni et al. (2009) define a side activity as a small-scale, home-based economic activity which provides a supplementary income at the household level. The owner of side activities either combines the activity with paid employment (full-time/part-time) or with unpaid employment, e.g. household tasks, or income

through social benefit or a pension. In the latter case, the partner provides the main household income. Side activities, as defined in this research, do not provide full-time employment for anyone other than those who operate those activities. When extra hands are needed, the family or neighbours pitch in and they are not paid (which contrasts with the literature on secondary activities which shows that these activities can also provide employment for others, see for example, Bessant, 2006). The majority of these activities are initiated and carried out by women.<sup>2</sup> Thus far, side activities by non-farmers have received scant attention in the literature on rural entrepreneurship and gender as well as in policy.<sup>3</sup> It is conceivable that a key reason for this neglect is simply the small scale of these activities and their perceived low economic potential in renewing rural areas. However, it is quite likely that such activities simply have not caught researchers' attention because they are literally invisible.<sup>4</sup> For example, in the Netherlands, side activities registered at the Chamber of Commerce and other professional organizations are categorized under 'businesses'.

Although small entrepreneurs in general are thought to improve the rural economy and provide a vital source of employment (Atterton and Affleck, 2010), this is not empirically supported in the case of side activities. In particular, their adversity to growth in combination with low income generation and limited job creation show the small economic capacity of side activities (Markantoni et al., 2011, forthcoming).

At a regional level, side activities influence the rural economy indirectly rather than directly, mainly by diversifying rural (tourist) activities, establishing networks with other entrepreneurs in the region and mobilizing local networks with other side activities in the region. As a result, side activities can play a role in activating and strengthening social vitality in rural areas. Side activities can offer a place to socialize and help fulfil social needs, not only for the initiators but also for local residents and customers from outside the region. Because side activities operate on a small scale, they can offer a more personal approach to customers. In addition, Delfmann et al. (2011) found that side activities can play a crucial part in building and maintaining social capital within a rural community and thus play a role in revitalizing rural areas.

A survey by Markantoni et al. (2009) showed that for those who engage in side activities, their business endeavour is linked to achieving modern lifestyles characterized by individualization and self-realization while financial considerations are of secondary importance (see also Markantoni et al., 2011). It is therefore important to analyse in more detail what motivates female entrepreneurs to set up these activities, what their obstacles and problems are, and how they organize their everyday life around them. In light of the lack of literature specifically addressing side activities by women who are not farmers, we situate our research within the broader literature on female rural entrepreneurship as outlined above. Based on the literature on female rural entrepreneurship (Anthopoulou, 2010; Loscocco and Leicht, 1993; Still and Timms, 2000) we will identify the factors that enable and/or constrain women in starting a small business in rural areas. In particular, we highlight the respective rural and household contexts for starting up a business. We use this frame of reference to analyse our data

<sup>2</sup> In the Netherlands, Markantoni et al. (2009) mapped the distribution of side activities operated by non-farm households from a survey of 36 rural municipalities. They found 260 side activities, of which 61% were initiated by women.

<sup>3</sup> Atterton and Affleck (2010), for example, note that 44% of rural small business owners had a secondary activity but provide no further discussion of these 'secondary activities'.

<sup>4</sup> In the wider study on side activities from which this article draws, it was necessary to physically go out into rural areas to locate them. In order to achieve this, we recruited students as research assistants.

and discuss factors that play a role in starting up and managing side activities in the context of women's everyday lives.

## 2.2. Rural context

Rural areas in general are characterized by a deficit in entrepreneurial attainment (Bock, 1999, 2010; Loscocco and Leicht, 1993). The 'rural' is often portrayed as backward and peripheral (Patterson and Anderson, 2003) and as having few employment opportunities.<sup>5</sup> For women, entry into the local labour market is additionally constrained by the lack of basic child-care facilities (for women with preschool children), as well as traditional gender barriers that view women to be 'by nature' home-centred or a nurturer and not as the breadwinner of the family (Little, 2002; Little and Panelli, 2003). As a result, rural women often take the primary responsibility for the household and child-rearing rather than the initiative to become an entrepreneur.

Nevertheless, there are rural regions which are characterized by a plethora of small businesses, in particular those related to the service sector, craft enterprises, care services and the agrofood sector, initiated mainly by female entrepreneurs (EC, 2000; Oberhauser, 1997). Rural transformation (see Steenbekkers et al., 2006; Woods, 2005)<sup>6</sup> has, in recent years, opened up opportunities for women, many of them urban newcomers, to start up small-scale businesses, often in the direct vicinity of their rural home (see, for example, Baines and Wheelock, 2000; Tigges and Green, 1994). Tigges and Green (1994) note that women residing in rural locations opt to start a business mainly for the reason of flexibility and because day care as well as employment options are in short supply (see also Anthopoulou, 2010).

Female entrepreneurs, however, face more constraints than men (namely ideological, cultural, and occupational segregation) (Anthopoulou, 2010; Little and Panelli, 2003). Moreover, several authors suggest that women entrepreneurs, in contrast to men, have difficulties securing bank loans to start up their business because they are perceived as comparatively less successful than men and because of their domestic responsibilities (Buttner and Rosen, 1989; Coleman, 2000). The conventional view of success is based on economic growth and profit generation, 'the male standards of success' (Tigges and Green, 1994), which ignores the importance women place on self-fulfilment, empowerment and social goals above income. Considering the more rigid gender roles and stereotypes in rural areas, the challenges for women wishing to set up a business are often amplified.

Although the issues noted have undoubtedly disadvantaged women, there are women who start small businesses (Braithwaite, 1994; Driga et al., 2009; Warren-Smith and Jackson, 2004). These women utilize the opportunity to initiate a home-based business that does not require a large investment and to balance their home-work life in rural areas (Baines and Wheelock, 2000; Oberhauser, 1995, 1997). Based on the above, Baylina and Schier (2002) conclude that working from home can be a way of empowerment, making women less (economically) dependent on their husband. As Oberhauser (1997) notes, women also gain intangible benefits, such as self-esteem and confidence. In contrast, Little and Panelli (2003) argue that sometimes a stay-at-home mother and homemaker could sustain and reinforce traditional gender roles and thus lack empowerment.

<sup>5</sup> This is related to the general structural weaknesses in rural areas (customer proximity, small markets, poor infrastructure).

<sup>6</sup> These changes are not taking place with the same intensity in all rural regions. The interplay of regional dynamics, population decline, entrepreneurial dynamics and global forces actively shape the economic development of rural regions.

Bock (1998) notes that the traditional male–female relationships are gradually changing as urban residents move into the countryside and challenge gendered lifestyles in rural areas. Female entrepreneurs are thus becoming more visible in the labour market, contesting established gender inequalities, the gendered division of labour in the family and society and the dominant traditional division of roles in the household which shape household business matters (Whatmore et al., 1994).<sup>7</sup>

## 2.3. Household context

European literature suggests that when women start a business, it becomes an inextricable part of their everyday life, identity and lifestyle. In contrast to men, the primary means of satisfaction is not economic (see, for example, Baines and Wheelock, 2000; DeMartino and Barbato, 2003; Driga et al., 2009; Egan, 1997; Still and Timms, 2000). Brush (1992) asserts that when a woman starts a business, she does not create an isolated economic entity, she is creating a business integrated into her everyday life. That is mainly due to women's primary responsibility for childcare and domestic duties (Mirchandani, 1999). In light of this, Ehlers and Main (1998) confirm that the majority of women who set up a business at home aim to transform their everyday domestic activities into money-making activities.

The decision to start a business is also influenced by specific transitions in a person's life. Aldrich and Cliff (2003), for example, explain that parenthood changes in the family structure, significant changes in marriage and retirement can all affect the decision to start a business (see also Culkun and Smith, 2000). Such life transitions are often moments to re-evaluate one's (aims in) life and future. It is not surprising, perhaps, that many small businesses are founded as a means to overcome and deal with specific life changes and to help people to achieve personal self-fulfilment (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Gomez Velasco and Saleilles, 2007). For some people, particularly those with preschool children, flexibility and control constitute important motivations, even more significantly than high income levels (see Greenbank, 2001).

Within this personal/family framework, the family household as a 'stage' for many activities has in general been neglected in research on entrepreneurs (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003). Oberhauser (1995, p. 51) notes that conventional economic analyses 'largely neglect the dynamic role of gender and household income-generating strategies and instead view the domestic sphere as a homogeneous and harmonious unit of social reproduction' (see also Ehlers and Main, 1998). Yet, Aldrich and Cliff (2003, p. 577) argue that 'during the start-up process, family plays an important role in the mobilization of financial resources ... the provision of human capital, and physical resources in the form of space in the family household'. The household thus functions as a crucial enabling factor for performing entrepreneurial activities. The lack of attention to the household can be explained, at least in part, by the predominant perception of entrepreneurship by researchers as a male domain (Ahl, 2006) dominated by production not reproduction. However, female entrepreneurs often combine domestic duties, childcare and work by intertwining home spaces so they become mixed spaces, making their home available for productive and reproductive work. The household then becomes a space where the distinction between private and public is vague and 'clouded' and where women homeworkers often struggle to find a balance fulfilling family duties and earning an income at the same time (Oberhauser, 1995). Our data will also illustrate this.

<sup>7</sup> In the case of the Veenkoloniën area, there are many specialized workshops and seminars targeting only female rural entrepreneurs in the region ('entrepreneurial rural women', 2000–2003), which encourage women to take action and exercise initiative.

In our research, we have specifically tried to identify the factors that enable women to start a side activity – is it the specific geographical context, or the personal or household circumstances that allow them to do so? What do organizational and emotional struggles at the level of the home entail and how are they resolved? Ultimately, we seek to explore what women gain from taking on these multiple tasks and giving up a part of their home. Before discussing women's experiences of starting and operating a side activity, however, we briefly outline the geographic context and research approach.

### 3. Researching side activities in the Veenkoloniën

#### 3.1. Geographic context of the study: the Veenkoloniën

The Veenkoloniën, a former peat reclamation area in the north of the Netherlands, is considered one of the most rural and remote areas in the Netherlands (CBS, 2009; Commissie-Hoekstra, 2001; Strijker, 2008) (see Fig. 1). Because of the active industrial sector (e.g. peat digging and processing of potato starch), the Veenkoloniën has also been characterized as an industrial rural area but one that required significant subsidies from the European Union (Strijker, 2008). A report by Commissie-Hoekstra (2001) on opportunities and barriers to rural revitalization in this area noted that the region suffers from an enduring and unflattering image as a region that is remote, isolated, monotonous and in decline.

Despite a government-initiated rural restructuring plan (the *Veenkoloniën Agenda*) to help develop and strengthen the region's identity and to improve its accessibility, the living environment and socio-economic development, the area is still facing many socio-economic problems (Strijker, 2008). More specifically, it has above-average unemployment, i.e. 9.1 percent compared with 5.7 percent in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> The labour market participation rates for both men and women are lower than the national average (–3% for men, –4.9% for women) (calculated from CBS, 2010). The average net income per household (28,000 euros) is below the national average (33,000 euros) (CBS, 2008). Current problems experienced in the Veenkoloniën may exacerbate the near future as agricultural subsidies for the region's most important crops are cut (Strijker, 2008) and as the region undergoes population decline as well as 'greying' (Haartsen and Venhorst, 2010). The Netherlands Bureau for Statistics estimates a slight population decline of –0.8 percent in the Veenkoloniën in the period 2010–2020 (PBL/CBS, 2009).

As already noted, one of the aims of rural revitalization at the national level (and in the Veenkoloniën) is the change in land use designations (Dienst Landelijk Gebied, 2007). As a result of agricultural decline, scale enlargement and farm rationalization, many agricultural enterprises have ceased to exist and agricultural buildings have lost their original function (Daalhuizen et al., 2003). Daalhuizen et al. (2003) note that the emergence of new types of activity has positive effects on rural areas such as the diversification of the rural economy and the creation of employment, thus contributing to the viability of rural areas and the preservation of cultural and historical values. Some of the farmhouses in the study area, for example, have been converted into bed and breakfasts, care farms,<sup>9</sup> art galleries, or tea gardens by people conducting side activities.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Unemployment rates were calculated from data combined from CBS (2009) and the UWV WERKbedrijf (2010) (i.e. those looking for a job).

<sup>9</sup> Care farms are farms with clients from the care and welfare sector. The main target groups are those with disabilities, including those needing psychiatric support, and younger and elderly people (Hassink, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> But side activities are not limited to former farmhouses. They are mainly operated in non-farm houses in rural areas. 1.

#### 3.2. Data collection and methodology

This article draws on a broader study of side activities in the Netherlands comprising two phases. The first phase of the study aimed to gain preliminary information about the background characteristics of the respondents and their side activities, start-up motivations, future prospects, and choice of location (see Markantoni et al., 2009, 2012, forthcoming). Although a key outcome was that the majority of side activities are initiated and/or operated by women, the project stopped short of exploring the gendered dimension of side activities. And even though the home as the location for the business comprised a part of the definition of the concept, the significance of this spatial unit remained under-explored. For that reason, a small-scale qualitative study was conducted which provides more depth with regard to motivations for starting side activities, enabling factors, everyday organizational issues as well as struggles and satisfaction resulting from operating side activities.

In this second phase of the study, we selected one rural region, the Veenkoloniën. In the Veenkoloniën, 94 side activities were reported in the context of the survey. Of these, 35% were in the tourism sector (63% of these were run by women), 33% were categorized in the service sector (71% of these were run by women), 30% in home-grown products (46% of these were run by women) and 14% in craft and arts (68% of these were run by women).

In order to collect data, in-depth interviews were held with seventeen respondents who own and run side activities in the Veenkoloniën. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours, was tape recorded, transcribed and coded. Box 1 summarizes the main themes that were discussed during the interviews.

The analysis of the data was done using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA and was based on coded themes emerging from the literature on gender and rural entrepreneurship. The research was undertaken by the authors and findings were triangulated by a survey (see Markantoni et al., 2009) in order to assess its wider application (see Decrop, 1999; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). During the in-depth interviews, the researchers also kept a diary where additional information was recorded especially relating to sensitive issues raised by respondents (such as health problems and infertility).

For the purposes of the in-depth research conducted for this article, the categories 'services' and 'tourism' were selected as they require more commitment, input and are more labour-intensive in terms of planning, finance, social and human capital than for example, selling home-grown products. All activities require some sort of investments, in terms of capital goods, human and social

#### Box 1. Overview of research themes during the interviews

- Original idea and reasons for starting up
- Daily tasks pertaining to the side activity and combination with household tasks
- Decision-making process
- Lifecycle of the side activity
- Unexpected problems and pleasant experiences
- Influence of the rural area on the start-up
- Significance of the side activity to the customers/local community/region
- Hopes for the future.



Fig. 1. The position of the Veenkoloniën in the northeast of the Netherlands.

capital, although this is more relevant for some than for others. However, starting a B&B or a pedicure salon often requires more formal training (e.g. management and professional skills) and investment (e.g. furniture and specialized equipment) than for example growing plants or vegetables and selling them in front of one's house. The recruitment of respondents drew on the database which contained address details and phone numbers per side activity. We first contacted potential respondents via the telephone, explained the purpose of the study and asked permission for an interview. Of the 33 people approached for an interview, 18 refused to participate, stating that they felt their activity was too small to be included in this study, they were not interested, or they had no time. Four people mentioned health-related reasons as a deterrent to participating in the research. In order to recruit more respondents, we also used a snowball technique, asking respondents if they could recommend someone with a side activity who might be willing to participate in the research. In so doing, four more respondents were recruited. As a result of these efforts, our sample was composed of ten women, three men and two couples. Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of the respondents.

With regard to the type of side activity, almost half of the activities were connected with tourism (e.g. B&B, group

accommodation, mini-camping, and canoe rental), six concerned services (e.g. pedicure, dog grooming salon, care farm, small shops), and four combined tourism and services (e.g. tea garden). We want to emphasize here that the term 'side activities' was coined by the authors/researchers, not respondents. It is important then to reiterate that although the term *side* activity suggests an activity of minor importance, this is not the case for those starting up and running these businesses. In their view, side activities often constitute an important part of their everyday life and identity.

#### 4. Making space for side activities

In the following section, we explore the factors that respondents mentioned that enabled them to start up their side activities. An important thread running through the discussion is the fact that starting up side activities was connected with an important life transition, often in the context of women's geographical and personal circumstances. Although the side activities are income-generating, most women derived motivation and satisfaction from non-monetary values and emotional benefits. However, female entrepreneurs also face and deal with many organizational and emotional struggles and gender barriers while trying to combine personal, family and business life.

**Table 1**  
Profile of the respondents and the side activities (sorted by duration of side activity).

Respondent	Age	Job situation	Marital status	Type of side activity	Sector	Length side activity (years)
Raymond	40	Paid employed	Married, 3 dependent children	Group accommodation	Tourism	<3
Magreet and Viktor	38 and 42	Both paid employed	Married, 1 child	Mini-camping	Tourism	<3
Mirjam and Dirk	49 both	Paid employed full- and part-time	Married, 1 child	Vacation apartments	Tourism	<3
Henk	40	Unemployed	Married, 2 dependent children	Tea garden	Tourism/Services	<3
Anja	40	Unemployed	Married, without children	Care farm	Services	<3
Sylke	39	Paid employed	Single, 2 dependent children	Canoe rental/Bed&Breakfast	Tourism	3–5
Helen	44	Paid employed	Living with a partner, without children	Garden decorations	Services	3–5
Wilma	51	Unemployed	Married, 2 children	Tea garden/plants	Tourism/Services	5–10
Jan	42	Paid employed	Single without children	Tea garden/Sells plants	Tourism/Services	5–10
Jenny	41	Unemployed	Married, 2 dependent children	Pedicure salon	Services	5–10
Carin	49	Paid employed	Married, without children	Glass atelier	Services/Art	5–10
Femke	49	Unemployed	Married, 1 dependent child	Furniture shop/Tea garden	Services/Tourism	5–10
Nora	46	Unemployed	Married, 2 dependent children	Pick your own fruit	Produce own products/Tourism	5–10
Hanneke	56	Social security	Living with a partner, without children	Dog grooming salon	Services	>10
Bea	60	Pension	Married, 2 children	Group accommodation	Tourism	>10

#### 4.1. The enabling region

The Veenkoloniën is considered to be an area in decline and one that is facing many socio-economic problems. Nevertheless, slightly more than half of the respondents (ten) moved to the rural Veenkoloniën (during the past nine years). This area offers abundant space (e.g. big house and garden), quietness, rurality, in some cases respondents lived in the vicinity of friends and family. The price of houses is also relatively low as compared to other regions in the Netherlands. Many of the respondents only realized the opportunities that this new space afforded them after they had moved to their new home, and they converted the available space into a business location. For example, Sylke used the canal in front of her house to operate a canoe rental business. Magreet and Viktor owned a vast property on which they could run a 'mini-camping', and Miriam and Dirk had an unused barn that they converted into holiday apartments for rent. Several businesses are sufficiently small in scale to be conducted within the perimeter of the family home. For example, Wilma turned a part of the house into a small café with an adjoining plant nursery, Hanneke converted a spare room into a dog grooming salon and small shop which sells precious stones, while Anja extended her kitchen to a multifunctional space for children to have lunch when they visit her care farm. Although the respondents might not have moved to this area if they could have afforded a more expensive house elsewhere, they converted the regional disadvantage to a personal advantage by starting a side activity. Wilma explains:

We came here because a) it is relatively affordable, and b) we were looking for a house with space to start business-type activities. And I did not expect this place to be such a nice area. I knew a little about this place ... indeed there are many things [side activities] going on here.

#### 4.2. Life transitions

Reinterpreting the region as one that offers exciting opportunities and new prospects is, for many respondents, a part of a broader process which includes transitions in other aspects of their life. Aldrich and Cliff (2003) emphasized that it is crucial to understand the role of life transitions in relation to business formation. Indeed for many of our respondents, too, the motivation to start a side activity coincided with a major life transition. In our research, respondents discussed significant changes in their marital status (i.e. divorce), a period of prolonged poor health, or a way of

coping with desolation arising from personal circumstances, for example, as a result of infertility. In each of these cases, a negative experience was eventually turned into an opportunity to give a new direction to their life, realizing ideas that might have been disapproved by a partner, exploring opportunities that match their physical limitations (Hanneke and Magreet), or rechanneling emotions that were initially reserved for one's own family (Anja).

For half of our respondents, parenthood was such a transition. As already discussed, for rural households, parenthood comes with additional challenges such as lack of available childcare, longer routes to the place of work, shops and other services, longer distances to school, school friends and extracurricular activities - all to be combined into everyday routines. In several households in our research, parents (re-)arranged their respective roles in such a way that parenthood implied the adoption of a traditional breadwinner model with the male continuing to work and the female resigning (or not seeking employment actively). The division of household tasks, childcare and paid work suggests a reinforcement of traditional gender roles especially in the rural context (see also Little and Panelli, 2003; Still and Timms, 2000). However, it is perhaps important, too, to emphasize that this solution to organizing family and work life is experienced by many women as an opportunity to be more flexible, to have more control over their daily agendas, and to work in a job they like in a location they like. Jenny, for example, shares the following:

At first, it was actually the combination [of work and household tasks] for the children. So I could be at home when they came home. That was the most important. Regarding the family then, in order to manage family life without external help from others, childcare, after school care, I find this [combination] very pleasant... I can combine my side activity with their school timetable.

We wish to emphasize that although our focus in this article is on women, the men we interviewed also singled out parenthood as the main reason which made them rethink their lives and explore ways of organizing care duties in combination with paid employment. In particular, fathers of very young children appreciated the side activity for its potential to allow a combination of both care and employment.

#### 4.3. Support from family

Many of those who carry out side activities in our study were entrepreneurs as well as family members, and their decisions were significantly affected by their family context (see Culkin and Smith,

2000; Henk and Trent, 1999). Indeed, it is important to note that respondents talked about starting up and running a side activity as a team effort involving their partner, and sometimes their children as well. Starting up a side activity entails a significant investment of personal (i.e. 'free') time. From the interviews, it emerged that the support from their partner included financial, emotional, psychological, and practical aspects (see also Baines and Wheelock, 2000; Oberhauser, 1997). The respondents talked about the encouragement received in the initial phase of realizing the side activity as well as the allocation of joint finances to the side activity 'project'. They mentioned the utilization of their partner's construction and renovation skills in modifying home spaces, and they described ways in which their partner continued to help with regular tasks such as serving coffee/tea, watering the plants, realizing opening hours, and so on. Hanneke and Femke describe the different kinds of support they received:

Hanneke: I can imagine, if you have a relationship with someone like me who decides in the evening, I need to take on another dog, then I need to be able to do that. There is only one person who decides how much work I take on and that's me. In a previous relationship I used to be constantly nagged, 'you are working too much'. But I work hard for this business ... For Harry [current partner] that has never been an issue.

Femke: When he is at home, he waters the plants, does the garden, puts things in their place, like heavy garden furniture. He creates a sense of inner peace for me ... Then I can do more.

#### 4.4. The multi-functional home

The respondents quoted earlier all emphasized the availability of space in the direct vicinity of their homes (and on their own property) as an advantage in terms of space for their business. Most respondents implied that a combination of home space with business space was attractive because it helped them address many organizational problems which would otherwise complicate the combination between household and care tasks with paid work. Nevertheless and in spite of the advantages and benefits associated with a home-based income-generating activity, some women also found this situation to be ambivalent. A potential problem was their continuous availability to both family members and potential customers or clients. Although some women carried out their work in a separate space in the house with a door that closed it off (e.g. garage, barn, or separate room), other respondents found it difficult to establish rigorous boundaries (both mental and physical) between home life and business life. Wilma illustrates:

If you have it [side activity] at home you make a lot more hours, because you walk into your business and you think let me do a bit of this and a bit of that. If you do not have it [side activity] at home then the distinction is clearer.

A few respondents deliberately or 'accidentally' mingled the designation of home spaces, creating mixed spaces (see also Oberhauser, 1997). Anja, for example, talked about her home/side activity as having become a *praathuis* (a meeting place), where people often visit her to have a chat and a cup of coffee, implying that her own personal space and time and that of her business was blurred. Another example was given, again by Wilma, who managed to rescue plants that needed shelter only by moving them into her house.

Wilma: This year, I could not place any of my plants outside because it was very cold. The plants grow and they need to be planted in bigger pots, otherwise they will die. ... there were so many that I had to put them outside [of the greenhouse].

Bettina: Do you also put them inside the house?

Wilma: Oh yes and in the bathroom and in the bedroom. (Laughing)

Bea illustrates the difficulty of maintaining rigid opening hours. She says:

You have to be able to do that. Not everyone can do that ... It always starts around 9 o'clock in the evening. And then something else happens, and I cannot do anything about it. Whether you have a bell at the door or not, it just keeps going ... You are just never free. That is because you have a business at home

Starting and operating a side activity entail compromise at the personal level. In many cases, respondents sacrificed their personal recreation and leisure time. To quote some of the respondents, 'only in the winter do we have a holiday as there are fewer tourists' (Viktor); 'our personal time depends on the bookings' (Olga); and 'last year we did not have any holiday' (Ray).

#### 5. Side activities as empowerment for women?

Factors such as the region, (multifunctional) home and family all play a role in the starting up of side activities. And even though the start up of a side activity often entailed much time, personal and sometimes financial investment, women also experienced intangible benefits relating to values and empowerment.

These benefits motivated women to make a success of their side activity and provided satisfaction as well. Respondents cited non-monetary rewards at the personal level such as 'personal happiness' (Wilma), 'personal growth' (Jenny), 'a time for relaxation' (Magreet), 'the opportunity to make my own creation' (Caren), and 'to do something I like' (Helen). Miriam's business provides an interesting example of high investment and unexpected rewards. Miriam and her husband both work (paid employment) and run a business renting out holiday apartments in their 'free time' (weekends and evenings). This type of accommodation is different from the others in the region, they said, because it is small in scale and the apartments are decorated in a traditional 'grandmother style', offering visitors a 'nostalgic' experience. In order to achieve this particular style of interior decoration, the couple went through a phase of research and acquisition of authentic materials, furniture and even paints, which typified this style. At times, they doubted whether if their personal and financial investment would be valued by visitors, who might not appreciate such trappings as an old-fashioned farmhouse bed (see Image 1). During the interview, they noted:

We had a lot of doubts, should we really do this, all that old-fashioned furniture. It could very well be that people wouldn't like it. But the opposite is true. I think people come especially for that bed! Many of those who operate side activities had similar 'success stories', for example, Helen, Wilma and Anja.

Helen: It's great. I have some women who simply come for the pleasantness and coziness here. They are a bit older and suffer a bit from arthritis, so I help them and we make jokes about how they will be finished first. And then people go home very satisfied, and that's really great. I think that has something to do with my background in health care. I like to make people happy.

Wilma: They say, 'the atmosphere here is great' or, ehm, 'you know exactly whether I come here to be quiet or for a chat'. You need to be able to sense that...

Anja: I have a lot of love to give, even though these are not my own children. [...] I know I am not their mother but the love I



**Image 1.** Old-fashioned farmhouse bed (*bedstee* in Dutch) in a B&B (source: the authors).

have to give and the passion to care for these people makes it possible for me to do this job well. ... This is a talent of mine that I can build on.

It must be noted here that these women have a background in the health care sector, caring for elderly people (Helen and Wilma) or for children with physical and mental impairments (Anja). During the interviews, they were critical of their previous job in which they were unable to provide the care they felt was required because of institutional constraints as well as the way work was organized in shifts and irregular working hours. Starting up their own business gave them the opportunity to create a workplace in which they felt empowered to develop and implement their own vision of how care should be provided. Wilma explains:

I stopped [working] because there were too many cuts in the time spent with patients and I couldn't handle that. I couldn't stand just seeing patients, giving them medication and then having to turn around and leave. I just couldn't ... It made me really sad. So I quit. I also had young children then and the combination was too much. [...] But, well, doing nothing isn't really my thing so I started volunteering.

The discussion above suggests that side activities meet a wide range of needs, for example, personal, family, social and financial needs associated with a sense of empowerment. However, in addition to professional/personal/family organizational struggles, women face traditional gender barriers and stereotypes which are especially pertinent in rural areas. Although gender stereotypes were not explicitly highlighted in the interviews, some women did mention that such activities are not usually carried out on a full-time basis by men. Jenny explains:

Jenny: Most men earn the main income, they work to earn the main income...This activity is not for a breadwinner. In terms of earning money this is I think a woman's profession.

Marianna: And what about household tasks?

Jenny: He [husband] cooks sometimes, but he works from 7 to 17:00, so he is not at home. In principle, he does not have to do anything. That is why I have my pedicure salon so small so that my husband does not have to clean the bathroom.

The above quote suggests that in spite of a sense of achievement and empowerment as a result of their enterprise, the role of carer in the home and household remains unchanged, that it falls under the responsibility of women. The question which arises then is the extent to which female entrepreneurship in rural areas challenges gender stereotypes at all. Silver (1993), for example, compared home-based with non-home-based businesses and found that the gender gap in carrying out domestic duties is considerably smaller when women's businesses are non-home-based. When women's businesses are located at home, women often experience a multiple burden. Although we find that this is also the case for some of the women in our study, we would still highlight the fact that women's narratives emphasize a sense of empowerment. A side activity can offer them the opportunity to do something on their own terms and feel empowered in their position in the rural household, their work environment and in their local community. The different women we interviewed attached different weight to the roles which gave them the greater sense of achievement. Some characterize themselves as being entrepreneurial in spirit, others above all as carers for their family and others as a combination of both.

The ability of women to be independent, to work on their own terms and to combine roles is often highly recognized by the family (partner and kids) as well as by the local community.

## 6. Conclusions

In light of the foregoing discussion, our main finding is that side activities are an important part of women's everyday life, needs, identity and lifestyle. Even though side activities often entail a sacrifice of personal and family time, women experience such activities as a personal achievement and empowerment.

In the Veenkoloniën, a Dutch rural area in decline, women have found affordable opportunities to start up a side activity. Although the respondents might not have moved to the Veenkoloniën if they could have afforded a more expensive house elsewhere, they converted this regional disadvantage into their personal advantage by starting a side activity and utilizing space, rurality and affordable housing.

Important aspects of the realization of these activities are life transitions and the support of a partner and, more broadly, other family members. Their support was regarded and valued as an inextricable part of the everyday organizational and emotional tasks associated with running a home and the side activity. The ongoing interaction between conducting everyday household tasks, including that of caring and organizing bigger projects connected to the side activity, provides opportunities for these rural women to invest in their own identity work as well so that they continue to be a career for their family as well as an entrepreneur. As Oberhauser (1995) notes, women engaged in home-based work have to negotiate not only their time and space but also their multiple roles in the household.

In relation to the literature on rural entrepreneurship and working from home (Oberhauser, 1995), it is notable that side activities were valued by these women most for their intangible rewards such as pride, personal growth and a sense of achievement

and empowerment. In contrast to the conventional view of success based on economic advance (Tigges and Green, 1994), the women in this study valued their 'success' in self-fulfilment, empowerment and social goals above income. Baylina and Schier (2002) found that, in Spain and Germany, working from home can be a way of empowerment, making women less (economically) dependent on their husband. Oberhauser (1997) noted in her research in the United States that women gain intangible benefits such as self-esteem and confidence. Our discussion mirrors and complements the findings of these studies.

In terms of broader implications, we argue that side activities may constitute the 'glue' that keeps households in (their geographic) place, in particular in economically declining areas and those that are lagging behind. As women make choices about work, family and overall well-being, the fact that they have established a side activity in which they can develop their own ideas and projects and be in charge of them is an important pull factor to remain in the locality. We argue then that women who own and operate a side activity can be a valuable source of entrepreneurial spirit within the rural community and further help to improve the quality of life and well-being in declining rural areas such as the Veenkoloniën.

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