

Families and land ownership in Norwegian mountain societies.
(ABSTRACT)

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General introduction

Only three per cent of the vast Norwegian territory is arable land, if cultivated with traditional technology. Geographically situated in the far north, but profiting from the warm waters of the Gulf Stream, Norway has nevertheless had agriculture as the basic resource and main trade all through history. However, summer temperatures are too low and summer seasons last too short for corn to ripen in the far North and in the mountains. Arable farming as a full time occupation is typical only of the fertile plains in the east and middle parts of the country. Since the middle ages grains have been imported in exchange for fish and lumber. Norwegian farmers have at all times had recourse to supplementary income, according to what is available – fisheries, forestry, seafaring, mining, cattle raising, dairy farming etc. The typical Norwegian farmer family have made ends meet in ingenious and multiple ways. Farming in a mountain society is only one specific way of plying the national trade.

All through history access to land has been of fundamental importance. When laws were regulated in the 1680s, in order to make Danish and Norwegian law more modern and more alike, the old Norwegian laws for land were left untouched. Thus a very heavy and long tradition has left its mark on farmers' sense of right and wrong in dealing with land. Feudal law was never introduced in Norway. Direct ownership of land was always the case. Estate farming never counted for much in a country with so little cultivable land and a difficult topography. Agriculture has taken the form of independent farms, rented and run by individual farmers or owned and run by farmer-owners. Recent research confirms

the widely held traditional view that farmers, whether owners or renters, have enjoyed a very similar social standing, and behavioural pattern.

As regards the transfer of landed property within the family, the odal right (*odelsrett*) is important. That is the right, according to a set of rules of priority, for members of a lineage to buy the odal-farm when and if it is for sale. The idea behind the provision seems to be the preservation of the property for the lineage and close kin.¹ The person first in line to take over the farm, whether an odal farm or just an ordinary self-owned farm, was the oldest son, according to the *åsætesrett*. Until 1854 brothers inherited twice as much as sisters. The oldest brother was given the right of priority to take over the farm undivided. He had to buy the farm, and the take-over was termed a sale. The income from the sale was distributed between him and his siblings, according to the portion each was to inherit. If possible younger siblings were given landed properties or values. This was not always possible, and then the siblings would be allotted an ideal part of the family farm, and the oldest brother would have to pay them yearly rent. There were legal regulations against the splitting of farms, in order to keep the farm viable as an economic unit. In 1769 it became legal to split the farm between two or more inheritors, provided it would give a living for a family and provided the oldest son got at least half of the farm. The laws regarding transfer of land thus favoured the lineage on farms. Recent research confirms that the transmission of farms, whether owned or rented, have followed much the same pattern.

It is to be assumed that the family household structure is dependent upon or influenced by these old long lasting legal provisions under which all farmers lived, whatever his particular way of farming. Our contention is that in the main, the mountain society farmer was not different from the bulk of his colleagues. He had to abide by the same laws as all other farmers. His resources and his circumstances were may be specific, but the ways in which he related to them may not be so special. At this stage of research, we are not able to make full scale comparisons, and we will limit our paper to draw the mountain farmer family's profile in one particular case, closely studied in our own research, performed on

¹ Known elsewhere as *Familienverkaufsrecht*, *retrait lignage*, *lovbydelse*, *bördsret* etc.

the *mountain valley* parish of Rendalen in the county of Hedmark, in south east Norway. It is a vast, sparsely populated rural parish of more than 4000 km².² Its main industries are agriculture, animal husbandry, and forestry. Most farms are located from about 250 to 540 metres above sea level – some farms even higher up. There are abundant summer pastures up to 940 metres above sea level. The right to hunt and fish in the mountain area are valuable assets belonging to the farms. The settlement pattern is characterized by separate farmsteads. As the population increased, farms were divided up and cottars made their appearance, and new settlements sprang up in outlying areas.

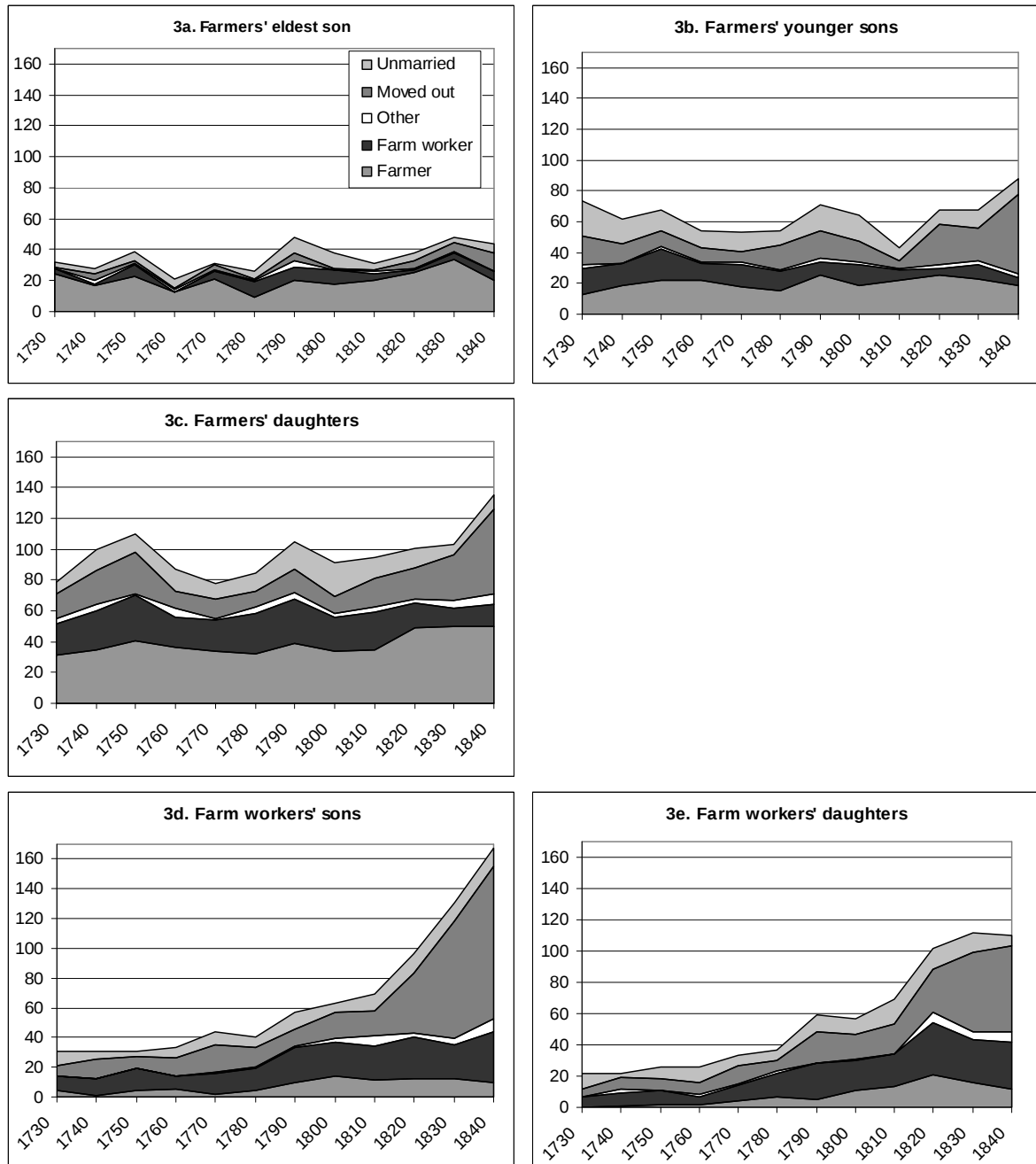
Main paper

The main part of the paper examines closely the relation between patrimony transmission and family relationships in Rendalen. There was a close connection between the farm (“the house”) and the family occupying it. The majority of farms were transferred from father to son (or son-in-law). This was the case both among freeholders and tenants. Regulated by the odal law, as mentioned, the eldest son had the right to succeed his parents as head of the farm and take over the farm undivided. However, this practice was also common among the tenants. All in all, there were few differences between the freeholders and the tenants in Rendalen concerning the possibility to transfer the farm to the next generation.

Due to the high degree of family transmission, a large degree of the farms had two adult generations residing. In all but a few cases the two generations would establish a common household and thus form extended households. It seems that this practice was largely due to the necessity of keeping the production as well as the consumption unit together. This process can also be seen in the way the family controlled the work force of their adult children. Although service was a common experience for young men and women, the children of farmers would normally remain at home, working the family farm as long as the parents were running the farm. The parents’ need for the children’s work could also postpone their marriage. Thus, it seems that the younger children had to sacrifice some of their well-being in order to sustain the prosperity of the family farm.

² Population of 1.000 people in 1734, c 1700 in 1801, c 3.500 in 1900.

Figure 3 a-e. Social development for children of farmers and farm workers in Rendalen according to birth cohort.



Source: The Rendalen database

Note: Included in these figures are only children reaching adulthood of families staying in Rendalen. Families that moved out before the children had grown up are not included. Social status (farmer, farm

worker or other) is estimated at about age 50 and only stated for those marrying. Unmarried people are those that die as never married or when passing age 50. Moved out have those people that moved out before age 50 either as unmarried or after marrying in Rendalen. The years refer to decades, eg. 1840 is the birth cohort 1840-49.