

Journal of Rural and Community Development

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Citation:

O'Connor, A., O'Hagan, A. D., O'Keeffe, S., Casey, H., Sweeney, J.,
McNamara, J., & O'Connor, S. (2026). Shaping the research agenda:
Research priorities of farming families in Ireland. *The Journal of Rural and
Community Development*, 21(3), 191–214.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

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Shaping the Research Agenda: Research Priorities of Farming Families in Ireland

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Abstract

Farming families play a key role in the agricultural industry both in Ireland and internationally. Although work and home life overlap, research often focuses solely on the farmer, overlooking the rest of the farming family. Involving stakeholders in the initial stages of research may help to focus research priorities on the needs of target communities. This research aims to identify farm family members' opinions on future research priorities for farming families. An open-text question asked 278 farming families in Ireland for their opinions on what the future research priorities for farming families should be. Qualitative content analysis identified five research priorities: succession; wellbeing; loneliness and isolation; realities of life on the farm; and the role of women on the farm. The inclusion of farm family members in identifying priorities for future research is important to reduce research waste and increase implementation and impact of research findings.

Keywords: Farm families, stakeholder, succession, wellbeing, research priorities

Définir les axes de recherche : priorités de recherche des familles agricoles en Irlande

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Résumé

Les familles agricoles jouent un rôle essentiel dans le secteur agricole, tant en Irlande qu'à l'international. Bien que la vie professionnelle et la vie familiale se chevauchent, la recherche se concentre souvent uniquement sur l'agriculteur, négligeant le reste de la famille. Impliquer les intervenants dès les premières étapes de la recherche peut aider à orienter les priorités vers les besoins des communautés cibles. Cette étude vise à identifier les opinions des membres des familles agricoles sur les futures priorités de recherche concernant ces familles. Un questionnaire ouvert a été administré à 278 familles agricoles irlandaises afin de recueillir leurs avis sur ces priorités. Une analyse qualitative du contenu a permis d'identifier cinq priorités de recherche : la succession, le bien-être, la solitude et l'isolement, les réalités de la vie à la ferme et le rôle des femmes dans l'exploitation. Inclure les membres des familles agricoles dans l'établissement des priorités de recherche est important pour réduire le gaspillage et renforcer la mise en œuvre et l'impact des résultats dans la recherche.

Mots-clés: familles agricoles, intervenants, succession, bien-être, priorités de recherche

1.0 Introduction

Family farms are an integral part of the agricultural industry, accounting for 80% of food production worldwide (Lowder et al., 2021). In Ireland, nearly all farms (99.7%) operate as family farms, more than any other country in the European Union (Balaine, 2019). Family farms are defined as farms managed and operated by a household, where farm labour is predominantly supplied by that household (Lowder et al., 2021). Family farming allows for the sharing of knowledge, skills and experience between generations (Chiswell, 2018). A sense of pride has been observed in farming families due to the several different generations living and working on the land (Holloway et al., 2021). However, this integrated nature of the farm and the family may lead to conflicts between work and family responsibilities, as demonstrated in recent research in Irish farmers (O'Connor et al., 2025b). The overlap between farm and family life means that for many farms, family members are often working and/or living on the farm and are exposed to many of the same stressors as farmers, either directly or indirectly (O'Connor et al., 2025b). The dynamics of farm families can be unique, with women on the farm often taking on the bulk of invisible labour, such as childcare, managing the household, caring for elderly relatives, doing farm work, serving as the farmer's emotional support, as well as working off-farm in some cases (Casey et al., 2025; Scheyett et al., 2024), which can have an effect on their mental wellbeing (Wheeler & Nye, 2025a). The impact of this integrated nature of farm and home on the farming family is often overlooked (Contzen & Forney, 2017). These conflicts may influence the perceived needs and priorities of farm family members in comparison to the primary farmer. Although research has been conducted on farmers' priorities across Europe (Crouch et al., 2024; Pemsil et al., 2022), farming family members may have unique experiences due to the lifestyle and multiple roles they inhabit over time. The exploration of these preferences with regard to the farming family members' role, both on the farm and within the family, may provide insight into these preferences.

Often there can be a gap between research findings and the practical application of knowledge generated (Boaz et al., 2018; Kok et al., 2016). This can be due to an inconsistency between the focus of researchers and the interests of the population under investigation (Tong et al., 2019). Input from stakeholders in initial or preliminary stages in identifying and prioritizing research needs can be beneficial (Grill, 2021). Recently, prominent bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development and the World Health Organisation have urged the inclusion of stakeholders in scientific research (Grill, 2021). Although traditionally used in corporate settings, stakeholder involvement has been increasingly used in many areas such as health, environment, social work, technology and agriculture (Grill, 2021). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this approach has not been used in research on farming families.

In the United States, community healthcare needs are assessed regularly to assist hospitals, advocacy groups and other organizations in prioritizing the health needs of the community (Diaz et al., 2019). This is based on community input to make decisions on funding and research (Diaz et al., 2019). Research has recommended that stakeholders should not have a research background to ensure the interests of the communities are central to the decision-making process (Boaz et al., 2018). Academics and clinicians who often determine research priorities may not be connected to, or have the lived experience of, the communities (Delman et al., 2024). In the mental health context, racial and ethnic minority groups' specific preferences and sociocultural barriers they encounter may not be taken into account (Delman et al., 2024). This approach to research may be useful for other minority groups and communities such as farming families.

Internationally, Ireland is on the lower end of stakeholder involvement in research, with a recent review showing only 2% of studies involving stakeholders were based in Ireland (Grill, 2021). This is despite the growing body of evidence that supports the greater impact of research that engages with stakeholders, especially in farming populations (DeLong et al., 2025; Spies et al., 2025). Farm families are an underrepresented cohort in research, as research has long focused solely on the farmer. Challenges facing farmers specifically that have been researched internationally include depression and suicide (Reed & Claunch, 2020), burnout (Jones-Bitton et al., 2019), succession (Hayden & Leonard, 2024; Humer et al., 2026), effects of climate change (Azeem & Alotaibi, 2023), and injury risk (Kjestveit et al., 2021), which echoes previous research on mental health research priorities for rural communities internationally (Phung et al., 2026). However, research on the impact of these and other issues on the rest of the farming family is limited, leaving an important gap in our understanding of rural population research preferences in Ireland. This understanding may facilitate the allocation of research funding and resources in the future that prioritizes the needs and desires of the farm family community, incorporating their voice in a practical sense. This will help to centre the voice of farming family members in future research and better inform priority setting in this area. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the research priorities of farm family members in Ireland. This paper will present our methodology and empirical findings, followed by a critical discussion of key results and study limitations.

2.0 Methods

2.1 Participants & Procedures

Data was collected as part of a wider survey on mental health and help-seeking of Irish farming families. Ethical approval was obtained from the Dublin City University's research ethics committee. Convenience sampling was used to recruit adult members of Irish farming families (members of farming families excluding farm owners or farm workers). Recruitment took place online via social media outlets and rural organizations. In-person recruitment was carried out by Teagasc during the organization's educational classes (e.g., Adult Green Cert and adult farm safety classes).

Prior to completing the survey, participants completed a written consent form and reviewed a participant information sheet. Participants were asked to answer an open-ended question about their opinion on the future research priorities in relation to farming families: "What topics should be priority for future research in farm families?" The question was optional, with no word limit.

2.2 Analysis

Content analysis was carried out on the free-text responses using NVivo. Content analysis is a flexible method of analysis that can be used both quantitatively and qualitatively (White & Marsh, 2006). The responses to the questions were read through in detail to understand the full context. An inductive approach to coding was adopted, in which responses were coded and refined, and relationships were established (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The number of times a topic or code was mentioned across responses was noted throughout the coding process. Themes were identified and refined into key themes through consensus of the research team. Each theme was evaluated individually, ensuring that the responses from individuals aligned with the theme. Participants' quotes are included in the results section and referenced

based on their relationship to the farm owner, gender (M=male, F=female) and ID number (e.g., Son, M213). Memos were produced on an ongoing basis throughout the process to ensure the coding strategies and resulting themes reflected the original dataset.

3.0 Results

A total of 467 participants completed the survey, with 278 eligible responses (43% male, 57% female) to the open-text question. Participants predominantly lived on the farm (76%) and were children (50%) or partners (27%) of farm owners. Following analysis, we identified five themes regarding future research opportunities in farming families: succession; wellbeing; combating loneliness and isolation through the community; the realities of life on the farm; and the role of women on the farm (see Figure 1) We believe it is important to note that although the question asked specifically about research directions for “farm families,” some participants also highlighted key areas specific to the farmer, which are integral to include as many of these factors have an effect on the family as a whole. Exemplar quotes are available in Table 1 (SQ - Succession Quote; WQ - Wellbeing Quote; LI - Loneliness and Isolation Quote; RF - Realities of Farming; RW - Role of Women Quote).

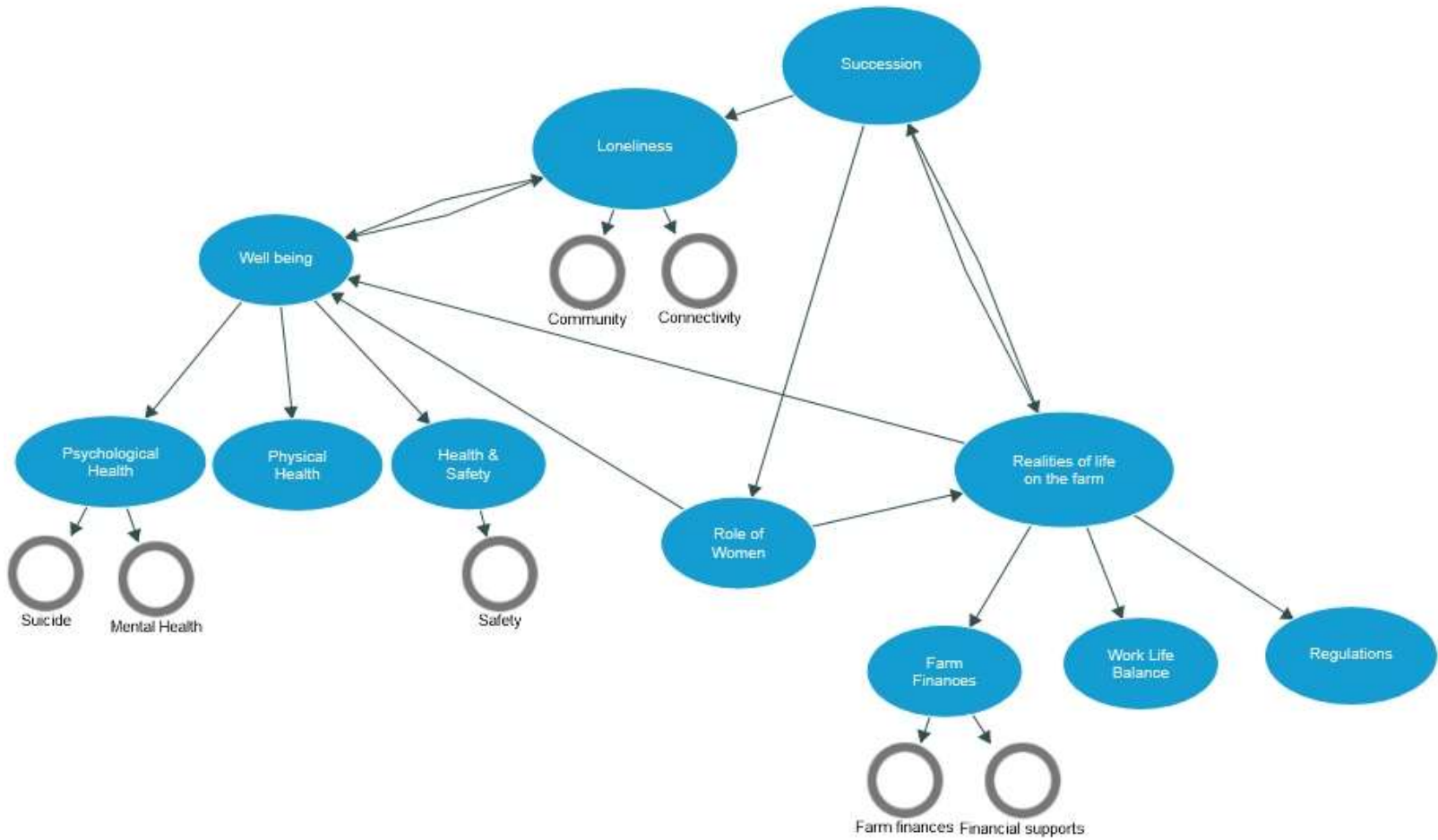
3.1 Succession

Succession was the most prominent theme (n=66). Respondents alluded to the stress associated with succession and the need for adequate research and support in succession planning to avoid family arguments and stress for all involved (SQ1). The changing preferences of the children of farming families were reflected in participants' awareness of the limitations of inheriting the farm and that adult children might be taking over farms due to familial pressures rather than any real desire or skill to farm the land, acknowledging the burden of inheritance and the guilt attached that some might feel (SQ2). This was echoed by other respondents in addressing whether children of farmers are taking over the farm due to an obligation rather than a genuine vocation (SQ3), with the consideration that they are forfeiting an alternative life that they may have wanted to live (SQ4). This was seen as having a ripple effect, as many farmers may be forced to continue working on the farm beyond a time when it is safe or practical to do so because they have no one to succeed them (SQ5).

Participants voiced two distinct inter-generational conflicts in relation to succession: the first involving families where numerous children are interested in taking over the farm, which can have an impact on the family (SQ6). Conversely, there are farm families where the younger generations specifically move away from farming and into other professions (SQ7). Across both of those scenarios, there are ever-present issues around finances and adhering to social norms (SQ8).

Participants noted the need to provide advice and information about the options available for planning succession to help them think through and talk through options available to them (SQ9). This included the different issues that can arise around succession and inheritance, such as children not wanting to take over the farm and conflict over which sibling would inherit the farm (SQ10). Further support is also required for the welfare of the retiring farming couple when they hand over the farm (SQ11), including the financial concerns that can arise during the transition to retirement, alongside changes in lifestyle and purpose (SQ12).

Figure 1: Concept map—Combating loneliness and isolation through community



3.2 Wellbeing

3.2.1 Psychological health. Mental health and suicide were frequently stated as research priorities by participants (n=74), identifying them as pervasive issues among the farming community. There was a need for more awareness amongst farming communities to support individuals but also to help people see the signs in others, in particular for suicide (WQ1). Some participants wrote of their personal experience of coping with loss to suicide (WQ2) to further emphasize the need for mental health support. There appears to be a generational divide that requires further research, with respondents acknowledging that older farmers may be less informed and more influenced by the traditional stoic values of rural Ireland than younger generations (WQ3). For the older generation, education, awareness and access to support are all key priorities (WQ4 and WQ5). Whereas for younger generations, “access to help” (Nephew, M249) is potentially a more pressing issue.

It was observed that often mental health challenges are recognized too late, that there is not enough awareness of the support available, and encouragement is needed to get people to speak about their mental health openly (WQ6). Participants also addressed the need for support to be more specific, one that adopts a “different approach for different people” (Son, M238). The role farming organizations can play, and the need for further monetary support for the wellbeing of farming families was also recognized (WQ7). Respondents also mentioned the need for other, more generalized supports such as those for stress management (WQ8 and 9).

3.2.2 Physical health. Participants cited physical health as a priority for future research (n=28) (WQ10). Some participants were able to link physical health to mental health, stating “...a healthy body has a healthy mind” (Son, M168), whilst others requested specific research on heart health, nutrition, fitness and dietary components of health. A need for better awareness and education was acknowledged to ensure farming families understand the impact of the farming lifestyle both mentally and physically (WQ11). Participants also acknowledged that health issues can cause conflicts within farming families, requesting advice on “How to deal with a family member that won't get the medical help that they need” (Son, M32). This highlights that despite the unique issues that affect farming families, they also deal with many of the same problems as other families, including alcoholism and/or other substance abuse.

3.2.3 Health and safety. Farm safety was a consideration within the general wellbeing of farming families (n=15) due to the dangerous nature of farming as an occupation (WQ12). Health and safety is a part of injury prevention, and participants recognized the need for a formal approach to integrating health and safety into their lifestyles (WQ13) and to provide safe working conditions for the next generation.

3.3 Combating Loneliness and Isolation Through Community

Loneliness and isolation of farmers was a research priority highlighted by participants (n=61) as “a lot of farmers in rural Ireland ... more than likely see no one from one week to another unless just the post man [*sic*]” (Son, M261). Participants identified older farmers as those more likely to be lonely and isolated (LIQ2), and participants also acknowledged how the isolation of rural living goes beyond just the farmer (LIQ3). The need for better consideration given to farming families when planning infrastructure was cited as a factor to

help counter the isolation (LIQ4). For the individual farmers, the importance of community was highlighted, and participants offered simple solutions (LIQ5).

3.4 The Realities of Life on the Farm

3.4.1 Work-life balance. An area of concern raised by respondents was work-life balance (n=45). The demanding nature of farming means that farmers may not get to spend time with their families, and there is a need for future research on developing ways to allow for “time away from [the] farm - [for] holidays” (Daughter, F191). The lack of time for family was also noted and how that may impact farm families’ relationships (RFQ2). Respondents acknowledged that farmwork requires constant care and attention and suggested the need for supports to improve the farm, those which benefit farmer efficiency and enable them to take time off and spend time with their families. Participants advocated for greater “work-life balance [such as] raising young families, working out of the farm and farming - possibility of free farm relief or grant to improve facilities/ machinery/fencing etc. to make day-to-day running easier” (Son, M245).

3.4.2 Farm finances. Financial issues (n=34) were common causes of concern requiring further research. Farming families who are experiencing financial burdens and pressures noted that this can impact their mental health (RFQ4). Respondents noted the need for employment off farm to sustain both the farm and the household (RFQ5), which added considerable pressure and stress.

There was also a reliance on family members that is unique to farming (RFQ6), with unwaged family members often being relied upon to remain viable. The future of farming was also questioned by respondents, as they reflected on the lack of fairness of market value “... for produce going out the gate” (Partner, F130) and the need for supports for farming families (RFQ8).

3.4.3 Regulations. Participants noted that financial frustrations were exacerbated by fear of inspections, paperwork and ever-changing regulations. These constantly changing regulations and constant need for investment to comply with these regulations leave margins ever varying (RFQ9). Respondents identified regulations as a source of stress (n=11), noting the financial burdens “... caused by governmental constraints placed on [the] farming community without the monetary support to implement them” (Partner, F52).

3.5 Role of Women on the Farm

Respondents reported the difficult life of many women on farms (n=10), noting that women often are not acknowledged for the physical and emotional work they do, leaving them to “feel [they] are the forgotten ones” (Partner, F141), existing instead “under the radar” (Partner, F151) and underappreciated. Whilst respondents provided rich insight into their experiences, participants consistently expressed the overall sentiments about the realities of their role on the farm (RWQ3), noting their contribution to farm life extends beyond their household and childcaring tasks. Many mentioned they often do not see the financial reward from their work on or off the farm (RWQ4). In addition to the myriad of roles they undertake, respondents spoke of the impact of being married to a farmer, as it is an all-consuming occupation. Participants also expressed “the mental impact on wives of farmers, [the] late nights, constant working, little presence” (Daughter, F17).

Table 1. *Exemplar Participant Quotes*

Quote ID	Exemplar Quote	Participant ID
SQ1	“...avoid family arguments and stress for all involved”	Son, M193
SQ2	“...the burden of inheritance and the guilt attached that some might feel”	Son, M161
SQ3	“...is the child/teenager obliged to eventually run the farm regardless of their own dreams?”	Partner, F160
SQ4	“...ask them do they enjoy the aspect of farming or do they want to escape it”	Son, M97
SQ5	"Farmers stay farming too long because they [have] no one to take over [the] farm. They find [it] hard to make a decision, as to what [to] do with the farm."	Father, M57
SQ6	“Taking over of farms in a household with numerous children and impacts on family”	Daughter, F41
SQ7	“Farm inheritance/ takeover- what is the fate of the farm if no one wants to take it over?”	Daughter, F174
SQ8	“The increased cost and pressures of daughters/sons taking over farms”	Daughter, F17
SQ9	“...to help them think this and talk out options”	Daughter, F189
SQ10	“...managing succession in families to reduce the risk of disharmony and upset”	Partner, F152
SQ11	“...welfare of the retiring farming couple when they hand over the farm”	Partner, F131
SQ12	“Support for farmers transitioning from full time farming and that identity to semi/full retirement. Tools to behave in that conversation are seriously lacking”	Daughter, F273

Table 1 continued

WQ1	“Talking more about suicide- the lead up to it to see signs, the aftermath of it and normalise talking about it. More information in relation to supports available in your own area”	Son, M254
WQ2	“I am coping ok and got counselling but the loss is huge”	Partner, F88
WQ3	“Older farmers tend to not talk about their feelings and recognise it as a weakness”	Daughter, F192
WQ4	“Educate older farmers that it is ok to ask for help”	Daughter, F192
WQ5	“Could a service be more accessible i.e. could Tesgasc offices advertise/ the marts etc, where older generation is more often”	Son, M245
WQ6	“Communication about mental health, often it’s swept under the carpet and almost labelled as a thing that’s not spoken about unless there is a problem”	Son, M72
WQ7	“[The] amount of funds being invested by the large profit-making farming organisations in supporting farmer/farmer family wellbeing”	Partner, F70
WQ8	“More about fighting trauma and grief”	Son, M229
WQ9	“stress managemen”	Daughter, F155
WQ10	“Looking after physical health better”	Son, M170
WQ11	“Education around individual self-care and general health. Healthy eating, physical exercise, meditation, yoga and breathing exercises”	Partner, F176
WQ12	“... farming is the most dangerous of occupations as they have no choice but to take risks with their health and lives every day”	Partner, F22
WQ13	“Get farmers to do health and safety very often”	Partner, F142

Table 1 continued

LIQ1	“majority of farm owners are old lonely men with no one to accompany them”	Daughter, F154
LIQ2	“Impact of rural isolation on young people, but also the whole family”	Son, M161
LIQ3	“Better transport and broadband in country areas, as they are further away from the towns that have all better facilities”	Partner, F131
LIQ4	“Support groups as a social outlet, or for discussing things and ideas, just to create connections”	Partner, F236
RFQ1	"My husband (like most of them) works 7 days a week. We never get to spend any quality time together. When he is in, he has mountains of paperwork to complete which is making a very difficult job almost impossible. From the perspective of someone who did not grow up on a dairy farm I could not encourage my children into this lifestyle"	Partner, F22
RFQ2	“I know I married a farmer but the anxiety of incurring losses and income being impacted is a real concern - on many farms”	Partner, F78
RFQ3	"Trying to manage everything - work, farm and family can be very tiresome. Both myself and [my] husband work outside the farm to make sure ends meet! A farm in this day and age can't rear a household like it did 30/40 years ago. It can all get very overwhelming"	Partner, F263
RFQ4	“the role of non-waged family members in the long term viability of farming	Daughter, F109
RFQ5	“growing food is the future - farms need incentives to do so”	Partner, F212
RFQ6	“The effects of constantly changing regulations and constant need for investment to comply in a very variable business margin industry”	Partner, M2

Table 1 continued

RWQ1	The real fact that most farming wives work off farm and are still expected by husbands to do 99% of housework, child rearing, bringing children to extra-curricular activities, cooking, entertaining and finance the running of the house. Add to this all paperwork like preparing accounts, registering calves, Bord Bia, paying bills etc. This is a living reality for most women married to farmers especially on smaller farms in the west of Ireland and the reality is that most earnings from the farm go straight back into the farm and the money earned by spouses is used to rear the families. I know countless women who are expected to rush home from work to have dinner ready on time and put up with sulking if they dare to do anything for themselves	Partner, F150
RWQ2	“ [The] farmers wife might work outside [the] home and have to work on the farm after work with no wage into their account technically”	Daughter, F232

Note: SQ - Succession Quote; WQ - Wellbeing Quote; LI - Loneliness and Isolation Quote; RF - Realities of Farming; RW - Roll of women Quote

4.0 Discussion

4.1 General Discussion

The aim of our study was to understand what farming families identify as priorities for future research in farming families. Involving members of farming families at this early stage is key to stakeholder engagement to ensure that future research is informed by the needs of the community and is an important basis for setting future research priorities (Boaz et al., 2018). Five key priorities for future research in farming families were identified by participants: succession; wellbeing; combating loneliness and isolation through the community; the realities of life on the farm; and the role of women on the farm. Although this research asked about farm family preferences, many respondents included areas specific to farmers. This demonstrates the role of the farmer within the family and how their experiences affect the entire farm family. Within each of these themes, the respondents consistently noted the need for more support, both formal (e.g., government incentives and grants, education programs) and informal (e.g., community groups, awareness campaigns).

Succession is fundamental in family farming (Contzen & Forney, 2017) and was the primary research priority identified by participants in this study. The changing preferences of younger generations, conflict within families, and farmer retirement, alongside the stress of the succession process, were key areas noted as future research priorities. Succession has always been a key issue in farming due to the familial nature of the agricultural industry; it represents more than the mere transfer of assets, but the transition of identity, which is particularly salient given that farming identity is deeply entrenched and socially validated (Chiswell, 2018). Participants noted that older farmers may find it difficult to step away from the farm and look for the 'perfect' succession arrangement, but the young farmer may not feel that same connection to the farming lifestyle and may still feel under pressure to take over the farm. The hesitancy of younger generations taking over the farm is echoed internationally, with more youths leaving rural areas and increasing reluctance to inherit the farm (Morais et al., 2017; Stockdale & Ferguson, 2020). Younger farmers may feel a sense of dissonance if they feel pressured to adopt an identity as the next farmer without genuine alignment, leading to hesitancy to take over the farm. There are a number of issues associated with succession, including financial security, work-life balance and conflicts within the family. Farming is not seen as a financially prosperous career path; instead, farm family members may feel the associated financial gain is not worth the hard work required (Beecher et al., 2022). There is a substantial conflict between work-life and family-life associated with farming (O'Connor et al., 2025b), which may reduce the appeal of taking over the family farm. Conflicts between siblings can occur as parents may have to choose between siblings who all want to inherit the farm. Sibling relationships and sibling co-operation can be an important factor in the success of a family farm or family business (Matser et al., 2020). Traditionally, a male son is chosen to inherit the farm, which may also contribute to conflict (Balaine, 2019). The farmers themselves may also be reluctant to transfer ownership of the farm, as this may force them into retirement (Wicklowsky & Shortall, 2024). After transferring the farm to their family members, farmers face a substantial change in their life; they are relieved of responsibility, which can be a challenge for many farmers as their identity may be deeply entrenched in their role as a farmer, and relinquishing control threatens this self-definition (Hayden & Leonard, 2024). If farmers are reluctant to retire completely or family members are cautious about taking over the farm, other options can be explored (Rech et al., 2021). Succession involves the complete transfer of farm

management, whilst inheritance is the transfer of assets and land (Deming et al., 2019; Chiswell, 2018; Leonard et al., 2017). Partnerships, however, can provide security for farmers looking to retain a role on the farm (Leonard et al., 2017; Rech et al., 2021). These partnerships can be informal (agreements based on trust between family members) or formal (legally binding). The more formally structured partnership allows for a clear succession path with agreements made in advance (Rech et al., 2021). Succession is rarely discussed within farm families (Hayden & Leonard, 2024; Rech et al., 2021), which may be in part due to the lack of adequate support for farmers to understand the process and various options available (Russell et al., 2020), as was highlighted in our findings. Therefore, succession and its impact must be considered in relation to inter-family conflict, mental health and work-life balance, as well as the transition of the older generations into retirement (S. F. Conway et al., 2016). Future research should consider ways to support farmers and their families in planning for succession of partnerships.

Participants highlighted the need for research into those farmers and families who may feel disconnected from the community. This could have an impact on choices relating to succession, as participants noted that this sense of isolation may influence whether younger generations remain and farm the land or seek other work or move away. This is in line with trends in the UK, where younger generations may leave rural society in order to further their education, careers, or social lives (Stockdale & Ferguson, 2020). Loneliness can also have negative effects on mental health (Hutten et al., 2021). Older farmers were of particular concern amongst participants. The financial struggles in farming have seen a shift away from farmers operating as communities to competing with one another instead (Firnhaber et al., 2024). Farming can be an isolating occupation (Davies et al., 2019), with some farmers taking on the majority of the work themselves; others may not have a family and may suffer from loneliness. This isolation diminishes the social reinforcement needed to sustain a positive farming identity (Evans et al., 2022). This is not unique to farmers, however, as social isolation is common in later life and can impact wellbeing both physically and mentally (S. F. Conway et al., 2022). Therefore, future research should focus on how to address loneliness and associated isolation within farming communities.

Prioritizing mental health across older and younger generations of the farming family was highlighted by participants within this study. In particular, there was a call for research on the signs and signals of a decline in mental health or suicidal ideation. This is an area that is widely acknowledged in the literature, as the mental health of farming communities is of great concern (Conway & O'Mullane, 2025; O'Connor et al., 2024). In particular, there was a call for research on the indicators of a decline in mental health or suicidal ideation to help family members support those who may be struggling. Suicidal behaviour is complex, often individualized and presents a challenge to determine (Tucker et al., 2015; Turecki et al., 2019). Despite high suicide rates internationally amongst farming communities (Arif et al., 2021) there is limited research into the identification of early signs and signals that may help to identify depression or suicide in farmers or their family members (Reed & Claunch, 2020). Suicide and stigma remain pervasive issues despite an increasing number of generalized campaigns and phone lines aimed at suicide prevention and stigma reduction (Oblak, 2025; Tucker et al., 2015). Educational interventions have been found to improve mental health literacy and help seeking amongst farmers (O'Connor et al., 2025a), and this approach should be considered in relation to the wider farm family. The educational interventions may also act as a verification process by fostering understanding and reducing stigma, thereby strengthening farmers' social roles and self-concepts. Given the prevalence of mental health challenges

among farming communities, the most effective methods of raising awareness and supporting mental health among farmers and farming families should be prioritized in future research.

We also identified physical health as a research priority for farming families. The participants noted the need to maintain physical health in order to protect their mental health, and this association between good physical and mental health being widely supported (Bowe et al., 2019; Kesavayuth et al., 2022; Mahindru et al., 2023; Ohrnberger et al., 2017). Some participants were more concerned with specific areas, like nutrition and diet, while others highlighted the need for greater education and awareness on general physical health. Research has found that farmers in Ireland and internationally are at risk of illnesses, including cardiovascular disease and obesity (Brumby et al., 2012; Kavanagh et al., 2022; van Doorn et al., 2021). For Irish farmers, diet is of particular concern as 79% reported not meeting the recommended daily fruit and vegetable intake (van Doorn et al., 2021). However, little is known about the nutrition and diet of farming families. There is also often lower awareness amongst rural communities about available health services that are available. This may be due to the barriers associated with being a farmer or farm family member, including not prioritizing their health, which also may be due to role expectations associated with the occupation, limited access to services, and not being understood by someone who is not from a farming background (Aljassim & Ostini, 2020; Skaczkowski et al., 2024). Future research should focus on the most effective ways to reach Irish farmers and their families, designing specific interventions and campaigns to promote physical health awareness and education.

Relating to wellbeing, participants noted a need for research into health and safety. Farming is one of the most dangerous occupations with some of the highest levels of serious injuries annually (Shortall et al., 2019). The nature of the family farm means access to potentially hazardous farm machinery and equipment for all members of the family including children (Shortall et al., 2019). Preventative actions, such as educational courses, may be needed to ensure the safety of all family farm members (Holte & Follo, 2018). In Ireland, the health and safety of farmers has long been a priority. The Commission of Inquiry on Safety, Health and Welfare at Work specifically included farmers under occupational health and safety legislation (Barrington, 1983). While respondents sought greater education on health and safety, further research into how they apply that knowledge is needed. Implementation and occupational health and safety adoption may still be low, with research demonstrating that just 55% of farmers implemented the necessary controls to ensure the safety of their farm (McNamara et al., 2017).

Alongside the mental and physical health concerns associated with farming, the practical aspects can also be sources of stress. Farm families acknowledged that farming is a demanding and time-consuming occupation and often the financial reward is not reflective of the dedication of farmers or the role of women on the farm. Participants noted that women often carry the burden of the household as well as supporting the farmer emotionally and financially. Financial concerns have been shown to have a strong relationship with negative mental health (Batterham et al., 2022). Despite the whole family contributing to the farm, there still can be an expectation of making a loss as the market value of produce may not generate enough income. One of the defining features of a family farm is the use of familial labour, which may be waged or unwaged (Bosc, 2018). In an environment where there is an expectation of making a loss, the role of the unwaged becomes more important, and this is in stark contrast to most other types of businesses. In addition to unwaged family members working on the

farm, often farmers and their partners work off-farm. Internationally, a family farm often requires multiple sources of income (Beach & Kulcsár, 2015). This is an additional burden on women on the farm because their off-farm income can help ensure the continuation of the family farm (Cassidy, 2019; Kelly & Shortall, 2002). Whilst recent efforts have been made to acknowledge and support female farmers and women in agriculture by the European Union (Conway & O'Mullane, 2025), it is their domestic role on the family farm that is of interest to the participants of this study. Research on the invisible labour provided by women has been conducted since the 1980s (Scheyett et al., 2024), yet women on the farm remain a neglected group (Wheeler & Nye, 2025b). The invisibility of women's unpaid labour can lead to a lack of recognition, potentially affecting their wellbeing. Research is needed to understand and recognize the experience of women in farming families and their role in the economic sustainability of farming in Ireland, as well as investigating different models of financial support.

To alleviate these financial concerns, some farming families will seek off-farm employment. The off-farm role of members of the farming family can lead to difficulties in achieving work-life balance, which was also recognized as a key future research priority. Work-life balance impacts family life as well as the farmers themselves. Family farming is a unique enterprise; it is not only a source of employment, but also a commitment to a way of life that integrates the work and home environment (Graskemper et al., 2022; McShane & Quirk, 2009). The multiple and sometimes competing role demands create potential conflicts within farm families. This is an unsurprising issue to be raised amongst farm families, as research in Ireland (Beecher et al., 2022) and internationally (Černič Istenič, 2025) highlights how this conflict between work-life and home-life is a source of stress which can impact the individuals and family relationships (Černič Istenič, 2025). Farming is a demanding job that requires long hours and many different and often urgent tasks (McShane & Quirk, 2009). Whilst respondents recognized that the nature of family farming is not likely to change, the ways of working on the farm could have an impact on work-life balance. In the case of dairy farmers, effective workload management reduced farmers' working hours, giving them more time for non-farming activities (Hogan et al., 2023). There are also options for farmers to integrate technology and specific work practices in order to reduce labour input (Hogan et al., 2022). Future research into work-life balance could expand on workload management as well as the use of technology across farm types to address issues of work-life balance.

Significant administrative burdens are experienced by farmers throughout Europe (El Benni et al., 2022). Regulations were identified by participants as a source of stress and a financial burden. Often regulations require an investment on behalf of the farm, or changes can cause fluctuations in the income of the farm that are outside of their control (Garvey et al., 2019). The additional work and often cost required to comply with governmental regulations has been found to be a cause of stress amongst farmers (Brennan et al., 2022; Daghigh Yazd et al., 2019). Consideration of the financial and administrative burden of compliance should be included in future research to better understand how to support farmers and their families through changes in regulations.

4.2 Limitations

Our findings and implications should be considered in relation to the limitations of this study. The use of convenience sampling is not demographically representative of the Irish farming family population. Additionally, this singular question was asked at the end of a survey which was focused on mental health and help-seeking in farm families, which could have caused participants to be

subconsciously primed. Future research should examine this issue using qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups, to enable richer insights through follow-up questions and appropriate prompting.

4.3 Conclusion

Whilst the findings are derived from a single open-ended question, this study contributes to the greater understanding of the needs and preferences for research of farm family members in Ireland. Farming family members identified five future research priorities: succession; wellbeing; combating loneliness and isolation through community; realities of life on the farm; and the role of women on the farm. Farm families experience many challenges. Farming may not be financially lucrative, with poor market value for produce, often requiring farmers and farm spouses to seek off-farm employment, supporting the household and sometimes the farm business. These financial concerns are compounded by the demands of the farm and impact family relationships due to the poor work-life balance. Women on the farm may often be burdened with managing the household and childcare while the farmer tends to the farm and associated administrative tasks. Family farm members can experience poor mental and physical health as well as frustration in not being able to support others through difficult times. These factors may impact succession, as younger farmers are reluctant to take over the farm and demanding lifestyle. In contrast, some farmers will be reluctant to pass on their farm and may find themselves lonely or isolated as they transition to retirement. This isolation also affects the wider farming family, with the lack of infrastructure and opportunities potentially impacting younger farmers' choices to remain on the farm. The need for greater support, either informal or formal, was identified across each research priority. Future research should incorporate the research priorities identified by the farm family community. Addressing these key challenges by considering the unique context of farm families and providing tailored support to tackle the challenges of succession, poor mental and physical health, work-life balance, financial concerns, loneliness and isolation, and addressing the difficulties of women on the farm is recommended.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Joey Larkin, Francis Bligh and Veronica Ryan from Teagasc for their assistance with data collection. Thank you to all participants who provided responses.

This work was supported by Research Ireland Coalesce under Grant number COALESCE/2024/3557.

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data is available upon reasonable request.

Ethical approval was granted by Dublin City University's research ethics committee.

Credit Roles: SOC: writing – review & editing, visualization, validation, supervision, resources, project administration, methodology, investigation, funding acquisition, data curation, conceptualization. ADOH: methodology, writing – review & editing. funding acquisition AOC: methodology, investigation, writing – review & editing, writing – original draft, formal analysis. JM: writing – review & editing. SOK: methodology, writing – review & editing. HC: methodology, writing – review & editing. JS: writing - review & editing.

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