



## WHO IS SIMONE VAN DER BURG?

### Can you tell us about yourself?

I studied philosophy in Amsterdam and Notre Dame (USA) and focused my PhD research on moral philosophy. After my PhD, I started working as a postdoc at the University of Twente. In my work today, I still build on the knowledge and work I did there in collaboration with people who made biomedical technologies. It was my job to explore the ethical questions surrounding these technologies and provide this as input for their development. At that time, Responsible Research and Innovation was just emerging, and the University of Twente was one of the pioneers. To bring together the multidisciplinary work done on this topic, I took the initiative to form an academic journal together with international colleagues: the Journal of Responsible Innovation. After working at the University of Twente I worked for 8 years at a university medical center (RadboudUMC) in Nijmegen (the Netherlands) where I focused on ethical and social issues concerning genomics (used for screening and diagnosis) until I eventually made a switch to Wageningen Economic Research where I work today.

### Can you tell us about your job, what does it entail and how you are connected to IoF2020?

At Wageningen Economic Research I explore social and ethical issues related to digital innovation for the agri-food sector and engage stakeholders in a reflection about how they can attend to them. The methodological approach is similar to my previous work, but now the focus is on digital farming. I am involved in research on digital twins (virtual replicas of physical originals that are used to inform farm management), AI robotics projects, and projects such as the Internet of Food and Farm 2020 (IoF2020).

In IoF2020 I am leader of work package 7 (WP7) on ethics which adopts a responsible research and innovation approach. In this WP, we interviewed 23 stakeholders to explore their view on the future of data sharing: we identified values and opportunities and possible problems and sensitivities. Based on these interviews we identified four scenarios for the future of data sharing, as well as a list of values that stakeholders used in their evaluations. We used these scenarios and values as input to enhance the reflection of 226 tech companies, researchers, and farmers throughout Europe on their preferred data sharing future. Based on this, we evaluated the European code of conduct on agricultural data sharing by contractual agreement and recommend ways to proceed toward the future.

### **What made you decide to do the type of work you do?**

I have always found it fascinating that people can have (strict) ideas about what is good and bad and talk about these ideas as if they are facts. This made me wonder how these beliefs are formed, whether and how moral learning can take place, and how it can be decided what beliefs or judgements are correct. What is moral judgement about and on what grounds can anyone say that someone is wrong?

In the context of technology development, researchers/developers interact in social practices that influence what they find good and bad. But these values are not always aligned with the values of end-users, who work in quite different social circumstances. This is to say that there are different social worlds within our society, which are characterised by different evaluative outlooks. Responsible Research and Innovation is very much about connecting those different social worlds. This leads to an exchange and alignment of thoughts and sometimes confrontation. How are we going to help realise technology that improves the lives of the people for whom it is intended? And what does 'improvement' mean? That is what I find interesting.

### **How is gender equality connected to the field you work in?**

Gender is a tricky issue to talk about. Everyone agrees that it should not play a role in selecting people for jobs or for promotions: women should have equal chances as men do. Yet, facts are different, for in a lot of EU countries women still earn less money, they get less promotions and they less often get top positions (and the Netherlands is a very bad example for this). So, something is the matter.

But it is very hard to talk about it. And that is actually the heart of the problem: the difficulty to communicate about it. It is possible to talk in general terms about gender issues, but not when it pertains to the collaboration in which one is actually involved. Whenever you raise the issue, everyone immediately tries to downplay its importance by saying it is not an issue. Men feel attacked whenever you bring the topic forward. And women do not want to attack or offend men and therefore do a lot of effort to choose their words carefully. But then a lot of the message is lost, and the unequal gender relations perpetuate.

In the past, I have had quite a bit of experience trying to seek the right words to address gender issues that impacted on me. In my previous job, for example, my boss made jokes and remarks to the entire team (as well as behind my back) about my ambition and my motherhood in a manner that would not have happened to a man. And I really hated it, but also saw that they were 'just jokes' and therefore it became difficult to find the right words to work elegantly around it.

I think a lot of women will recognize the problem of trying to find the right words in order not to offend men or appear like a woman who feels 'underestimated'. But what should be recognized more is that it is not only women who have a problem. It is a communication problem of men and women together. It should not be only the women's responsibility to find the right language to tell men what should be changed; it should also be the men who think about what they can do to allow women to flourish more in the collaboration with men. Women cannot change the communication all by themselves, especially not if they are being careful and want to avoid blaming men for behaviour that they did not 'choose', but which comes with growing up in a gendered society. Men and women together should be more considerate toward each other's gendered socialisation and should be more emphatic when they choose words to communicate professionally.

This also touches on another issue. Communication is not only verbal. We also communicate with behaviour. I think part of the reason why there are not more women in top positions, is because it is more difficult for women to fit behaviour, that is seen as successful. This behaviour does not fit with the way they see themselves. My experience is that ambition is easier recognised and appreciated in men. There seem to be fewer female role models that actually look like something women want to be. With this, I mean that successful women sometimes adopt mannerism that does not particularly appeal to other women.

The gender-related issues I have observed and encountered during my career are not strictly dichotomous (male-female) but rather related to a workstyle I see more often adopted by men. You could say that many successful people have a certain ability to showcase their ambitions, accomplishments, and skills which makes it easier for them to be taken seriously. But this behaviour fits more easily with gender identities of men than of women. So, a lot of the women face the problem of trying to find the right way of communicating their ambition in their behaviour, while preserving integrity, meaning while maintaining a sense of their identity as persons.

## YOUR MESSAGE

### **How do you think your work field considers gender mainstreaming (the strategy towards realising gender equality and combating discrimination)?**

Generally speaking, I think gender is not really a subject of discussion. Although it has become a theme in IoF2020 and SmartAgriHubs, it is positioned as a separate subject and not ingrained in the work that is already being done in these projects. It is, for example, noteworthy that in IoF2020 there are only a few women in higher positions. Most of the women in the project have supporting roles. This has altered a little in IoF2020 while the project progressed, as women WP leaders were added and/or were replacing men who left the project. But we have never discussed the professional language that these men and women are to speak in the project, in order to make everyone flourish. Nor have we considered more deeply questions regarding how women in the agrifood sector can be empowered.

I believe digitalisation could and should be used to empower women in the agri-food sector. For instance, it would be interesting to research where women are most active in European agri-food and how digital technology can support them. Our current way of working mainly focuses on what men are doing and finding ways to make it easier, which will also make it easier for women. But given that women did not do the same jobs to begin with, it is questionable whether they will actually profit from these innovations.

### **What should agri-tech businesses be doing better to strive towards more gender mainstreaming and how can we inspire a more diverse and inclusive future in our industry?**

I think we should focus more on areas in which women are active and find out how digitalisation could contribute to their work. However, we should also realise that women are not a homogeneous group. So perhaps the solution should be to make diversity a priority. In IoF2020 and SmartAgriHubs the focus lies on large businesses that show very little diversity. We should look into more diverse companies and find out how technology can help them.

What types of people are farmers and how do they differ? There are old farmers and young farmers, female farmers and male farmers – each with different interests and needs. There are migrant workers in our sector, who make up the most vulnerable group with the lowest-paid jobs, who are rarely if ever included in our

conversations. We tend to direct our attention to pro-tech farmers, but that shouldn't mean that we exclude other perspectives. We should welcome diversity in the perspectives on the future of farming.



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