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Beyond "Inherit It or Marry It": Exploring How Women Engaged in Sustainable Agriculture Access Farmland

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Abstract Despite an overall decrease in new farm operations, the number of women farm operators grew 30 percent between 2002 and 2007, with 300 percent growth since 1978. This research suggests, however, that opportunities for women have unfolded unevenly. We argue that women's opportunities to farm are affected by their social location and life course, suggesting that as their lives unfold across specific cultural and economic moments, different cohorts of women experience divergent opportunities to farm. Using in-depth interviews with women engaged in sustainable farming in the Inland Northwest, this article examines how women access farmland. Our findings suggest three methods for access: (1) access through the traditional means of marrying a male farmer and then carving out space for one's self as a farmer; (2) access later in life after a life-altering event like divorce and using personal financial means, such as retirement income or selling appreciated property; (3) access at a young age through the pooling of marital resources with a husband who works off the farm. Our research suggests that women's land access should not be presumed a progressive narrative and suggests the need for a more complex understanding of the challenges that women in agriculture face today despite their increased presence in farming.

Introduction

The past three decades have seen a marked increase in the number of women entering farming in the United States. In 1978 there were 104,134 farms with women as the primary operators; however, by 2007 that number increased to 306,209, a nearly 300 percent increase. Women operate 14 percent of farms today, compared to 5 percent in 1978. This increase has held steady in recent years—the number of women farm operators grew 30 percent between 2002 and 2007—despite the overall decrease of new farm operations in the same time interval (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Much of this growth in women farmers is due to women farming outside the traditionally male-dominated field of conventional U.S. agriculture (Sumner and Llewelyn 2011; Trauger 2004). Women now represent 40 percent of

community-supported agriculture[1] operators and 21 percent of organic farmers (Jarosz 2011:311). This project explores the growth of women in this sector of the field.

The opportunities for women to enter into farming and alternative agriculture in the past 30 years, however, have unfolded unevenly. Using in-depth interviews with women engaged in sustainable and alternative agriculture in the Inland Northwest, our research indicates how a woman's opportunities to farm are affected by her particular social location and life course. As women's lives unfold across structural shifts shaping women's land access—including legal rights, cultural attitudes toward women, contemporary trends in sustainable farming, and an increase in women's education levels and economic power—different cohorts of women experience divergent opportunities to farm. Furthermore, this research also suggests that, despite the increasing numbers of women in farming, for many women access to land is directly tied to a male partner. So while the increasing number of women farmers in the United States is clearly linked to the growth of sustainable agriculture, this article explores a more complex and nuanced understanding of the challenges that women in U.S. agriculture face today despite their increased presence in farming.

Literature Review

In many ways, these challenges stem from a long history of structural and cultural discrimination against women as landowners and farmers. Historically, women were denied the legal right to own land. Prior to 1850, "American common law deprived married women in the United States of direct ownership of the land" (Jensen 1991:1). Even after the outright barring of women from landownership ended, legal policies lingered that encumbered women's ability to access farmland. In fact, until 1982, federal estate tax was written so that on the death of a husband, a farm wife would be taxed as if she had inherited the farm rather than recognizing her as a co-owner; in contrast, if the wife died, her husband paid no such tax (Jensen 1991:1–2). Moreover, even after these legal limitations were lifted, social custom dictated that land was passed down from father to son (Jensen 1991).

Despite these legal and social customs limiting women's land access, Jensen's (1984), Sachs's (1983), Rosenfeld's (1985), and Whatmore's (1991) research, along with other scholars' foundational work on

[1] "Community supported agriculture" is the practice of buying a share of a farm's goods at the beginning of the season and receiving a share of what is produced throughout the season.

women and farming, details the importance of women to the success of U.S. farms. Working to make the "invisible farmer visible" (Haney and Knowles 1988:1), these scholars explored why women in the United States were denied visibility as farmers and, using historical data, contextualized the importance of women's labor to the success of farms. Sachs (1983), for example, noted that women who worked with their husbands on the farm were often hesitant to label themselves as "farmers," despite the considerable work that they did, including managerial and farm labor (in addition to nearly all the household reproductive labor). In contrast, she noted, women on farms who were not married were much more likely to label themselves as farmers (109). This distinction is particularly important given that "women's relationship with men on farms was a primary condition influencing [women's] involvement in the farming operation," with married women describing themselves as workers and their husbands as managers. Furthermore, women who were not married primarily accessed land through inheritance (Sachs 1983:81–82). Geographers point out that this gendered hegemony is further reflected in the spaces of agriculture, where women have historically had less access to spaces of agricultural knowledge and power (Whatmore 1991).

Despite women's being less likely to identify as farmers and having less decision-making power on farms, Rosenfeld (1985) notes that women's labor is particularly important in highly labor-intensive types of farming and ranching operations, which require daily care for livestock or vegetable crops. These findings are currently reflected in research that suggests women engaging in sustainable agriculture tackle the most labor-intensive forms of farming (Trauger 2004). Despite these findings, Rosenfeld (1985) and Whatmore (1991) note that women also most frequently take off-farm work to support financially vulnerable farms.

The social and cultural changes of the past three decades, however, have in some ways transformed the roles of farm women. For example, current research on conventional agriculture suggests a change in men's attitudes about women on the farm. The traditional division of farm labor devalues women's farm work (where women keep the books, are on call for picking up parts for machinery, and run machinery during the busy season), leading to a view of men as primary operators and women as merely helpers. Changing views on farm gender roles are reflected in a small body of new research that suggests male farmers increasingly see women's role on the farm not "simply as helpers" but rather as "diverse and important to farm operations" (Beach 2013:210).

But since researchers explored the gendered dynamics of farming in the 1980s and early 1990s, the explosion of sustainable and alternative

farming practices in the United States and elsewhere seems to have transformed women's opportunities in farming. Researchers note that sustainable agriculture is increasingly a niche where women find success and welcoming spaces outside the traditionally male-dominated world of U.S. agriculture (Sumner and Llewelyn 2011; Trauger 2004). Thus women represent 40 percent of community-supported agriculture operators and 21 percent of organic farmers (Jarosz 2011:311), suggesting that women may be more likely to be drawn to the sustainable agriculture paradigm. As Hambleton (2008) argues, women

> have a very different vision of how land resources should be used. They are more inclined to produce for specialty markets, personal fulfillment, and take on enterprises involving more physical labor than capital investment in big machinery. The products they produce are more personalized and marketed in high-touch environments, such as farmers markets, where their sales strategies involve getting to know their customers. (18)

As this literature suggests, scholars sometime use the links between women and an ideological belief in the tenets of sustainability to explain this growth of women's participation in farming, sometimes arguing that women as a group are ideologically driven to sustainable agriculture rather than practicing sustainable farming because of economic opportunities or other structural conditions.

Indeed, much of the research on women in sustainable agriculture explores their ideological motivations for farming rather than examining the structural conditions that frame their participation. But the desire to practice sustainability may not fully explain women's participation or promise more gender equity in general. This project, then, specifically explores the structural opportunities and barriers related to women's land access. What are the other factors that determine why women participate in sustainable agriculture? Specifically, why and how do they access farmland?

After all, despite the possibilities for more gender equity, research shows that traditional gender roles are often maintained within sustainable and alternative agriculture. The increasing opportunities for women in sustainable agriculture might signal possibilities for more gender equity in U.S. farming; as Trauger (2004:304) notes, "women find support for their identity as farmers in the spaces of the sustainable agriculture community," which may in part suggest women's attraction to it. But Hall and Mogyorody's (2007) research complicates these findings when they look at the private spaces of organic farming. They find that "most organic farms exhibited a fairly conventional gendered

division of labor and power" (295). Males were generally not involved in day-to-day domestic purchases, management, or child care, "but were invariably involved, and despite their claim of female control over the household, often had veto power in major purchases or child decisions such as changing schools or discipline issues" (297).

Research also indicates that women's experiences in sustainable agriculture are complex and multifaceted, suggesting women should not be treated as a singular entity. Jarosz (2011:310) notes everything from farming to care practices among women in alternative agriculture varies across "individual experiences." Pedersen and Kjærgård's (2004) work, for example, suggests women use traditionalist or detraditionalist strategies in their farming rather than a uniform approach to farming. Sumner and Llewelyn (2011) suggest that strategies for farming are shaped by the values of individual farmers and those farmers' specific financial situations. Similarly, Trauger et al. (2008) examine the material consequences of differences among women in agriculture, particularly in relation to support such women need from farm extension officers. Their study follows women in both conventional and alternative agriculture and builds from previous research to conclude that women are underserved in agricultural education and technical assistance. They find that "farming women's identities vary over time and space and in relation to others, and agricultural education, to be relevant to the most women, must incorporate structures and frameworks that address their shifting and contingent identities" (438).

Taken together, this research reveals that women's increased participation in farming is not uniform and does not necessarily lead to gender equity in farming; more participants does not mean an equitable division of labor or equitable access to farm lands. As Hall and Mogyorody (2007:313) point out, "there are some very conservative patriarchal viewpoints on gender and the family among elements of the organic farming community that have little to do with conventionalization. These and other contradictions within the organic farming community speak to the challenges of realizing widespread equality for women simply through a shift to organic farming, whether it takes an alternative or a conventional form." Understanding the complex histories and differences among women in sustainable agriculture, then, can lead to a more complete vision of how to create equity within the multifaceted and at times contradictory landscape of sustainable farming and farming in general.

For example, the increased involvement of women in alternative agriculture is also related to the dramatic changes in education and labor opportunities for women more generally, opportunities that are pronounced for white, middle-class women. Thus, Grifka (2008:22)

observes that "farms operated by Caucasian [white] women increased the most in numbers in the last 20 years," a shift that must be understood in relation to white women's increased educational and economic opportunity since the 1970s.

As this research indicates, the process of accessing land is related to other forms of structural inequality related to class, race, and educational privileges. A growing body of research indicates that farmers engaged in sustainable practices (such as community-supported agriculture and organic farms) tend to be more educated, are younger, and have greater access to capital than their peers in conventional agriculture (Comer et al. 1999; Duram 2005; Jarosz 2011; Pilgeram 2011). In addition, farm operators are largely white. African Americans own less than 1 percent of land while Latinos own less than 2 percent, in part due to partitioning sales (the forced sale of a farm by a partial owner, typically after the death of a farm owner without a will), nonparticipation in farm programs, and systemic discrimination by the USDA (Gilbert, Sharp, and FeZin 2002). Thus, race, ethnic origin, and class are critical factors in accessing land. The importance of nonwhites in the success of U.S. agriculture, of course, should not be downplayed; however, as Allen and Sachs (1993:148) note, despite the necessity of labor from ethnic minorities for the success of both conventional and sustainable agriculture, "ethnic minorities have not had equal access to land, capital, or decision making in the food and agriculture system."

When discussing women in sustainable agriculture in the Northwest, then, it is important to note that we are primarily discussing white, well-educated women. Such women have been the subject of similar kinds of discrimination and restrictions in land access and control, even in the seemingly progressive world of sustainable agriculture (Allen and Sachs 1993). But they are a complex group whose participation in sustainable and alternative farming is structured by a host of other factors. To say that women are increasing their participation glosses over the complex ways that gender, class, economic opportunity, and age cohere to structure how (not just why) women participate in sustainable farming.

The work on women in sustainable agriculture is incomplete—leading scholars suggest that "gender analysis remains on the margins of the sociology of agriculture" (Allen and Sachs 2007:4)—making work on women and sustainability particularly timely and important (Allen 2006; Allen and Sachs 2007). This project begins to fill this gap in the research, especially since researchers have relatively little insight into women's farmland access. In Pilgeram's (2011) study of sustainable farming and class, she observes that women's access to sustainable farms and land

seems to be tied to a relationship with a male, such as her husband or father; but these conclusions, she notes, were beyond the primary scope of her project. This study seeks to explore the structures and opportunities that allowed women to access farmland as well as the limitations to that access that women have faced.

Given the historic and structural barriers to women's access to farmland as well as the traditional masculinization of farming, this research asks: What are the different ways that women engaged in sustainable agriculture access farmland and how are those pathways to access affected by specific economic and cultural moments?

Methods

To answer that question, we interview women engaged in sustainable farming in the Inland Northwest to examine how women access farmland. Analyzing data from 17 semistructured, in-depth interviews with female farmers in sustainable agriculture production in "Sunset County," a 1,000-square-mile county, this research examines the variety of means through which farm women of different ages gain access to farmland.[2] The sample size limits generalizations that can be drawn, but is consistent with other studies of its kind (Beach 2013; Meares 1997; Trauger 2004). Specifically, we interviewed women who were actively involved with farming, but may or may not own the land they were farming. Many women in the United States own farmland (as a result of their husbands' death) but do not farm that land. Our research investigates strategies women use to farm, from outright landownership to leasing land and even growing crops in people's backyards.

Sunset County is unique in its particularly fertile soil, and most farming in the county is large-scale commodity crop production. In addition, the county is home to a large, state-funded university. For these reasons it enjoys more economic prosperity than its neighbors. The larger region, however, is economically depressed and is one of the more conservative areas in the country.

We selected the interviewees for this project by creating a population of all women involved in sustainable agriculture production in the region. Working with various stakeholders in the area, including farmers' market managers and the small and sustainable farm extension officer for Sunset County and using online resources, we compiled a population of 40 women involved in sustainable farming in our

[2] This is a fictitious county used to protect the identity of respondents. Pseudonyms are used for respondents for the same reason. Furthermore, aspects of the women's stories that would be particularly identifying have been changed.

community. This population, we believe, captured most (if not all) women involved in sustainable agriculture production in our community for two primary reasons. First, when we showed the list of 40 women to additional stakeholders, they were unable to name anyone to add to the list. Second, we had considered using snowball sampling, but at the interviews women were unable to add any additional names.

Following internal review board protocols, we sent letters to the women in the population asking them to consider participating in the study and offering them $25 for their participation. Four letters were returned as undeliverable, and we determined that these women were no longer farming in the region. Four women replied to say that they had either retired or quit farming. The remaining 32 received e-mails or phone calls requesting an interview. Only one woman refused to be interviewed; 14 others either did not have operable e-mail accounts or did not reply to phone or e-mail requests for interviews. After two such unanswered requests, we assumed the farmer preferred not to participate.

The remaining 17 women involved in sustainable agriculture were interviewed in fall and winter 2012–13. Each of the interviews was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. After the interviews, the interviewers took preliminary notes in a field notebook on the audio recorder. These notes included details about the setting of the interviews, the demeanor of the farmer, and information about the farm (for example, the primary crops grown). The semistructured interviews lasted between one and a half hours and three hours and were primarily conducted in person on the farm. Five interviews took place over the phone. These interviews were somewhat shorter, but as informative and rich as on-farm interviews. The names of all respondents have been changed for publication and especially identifying or private information has been removed.

Using NVivo, we coded the transcriptions and field notes using line-by-line analysis, then cross-tabulated the coded data by hand. While the process was laborious, important themes emerged during cross-tabulation. Relevant to this article, we identified the important theme of how women accessed land (coded as "land access") and cross-tabulated it against other codes to discover the complex relationship between land access, age, and marriage.

Data

In examining demographic information about the women, we found their similarities to be perhaps most obvious (beyond the fact that all the

women were farmers). Each was either currently or formerly married to a man, with the exception of one woman. Four of the women had "some college," six had college degrees, six had master's degrees, and one had a PhD, making them better educated than the county average, where 28 percent of the population had not attended college, but not significantly better educated given that 44 percent of the county population possesses at least a college degree (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2013). The women were all white, much like the county (and state) population, which is more than 90 percent white for both women and men (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Furthermore, all but two of the women had moved to Sunset County from outside the region, growing up in more populated environments. Only two women had grown up in agricultural families.

Perhaps the most important distinction between the women was age—the youngest was 30 at the time of the interview and the oldest was 72. The women were distributed in two broad age groups. Eleven were between the ages of 52 and 72 (and eight of these were between the ages of 56 and 65). The remaining six women were between 30 and 41 years old. Thus, all these women are demographically similar to each other with the exception of their age cohorts. This condition is in line with Korb's (2004) findings, which indicate women farmers include an older cohort of women and a much younger cohort. Data collected here, however, suggest age bifurcation may mask important differences within these age cohorts. Thus, our research indicates three broad trends in how women access land, and while these trends largely fall along age cohorts, there are noteworthy exceptions.

The three trends are: women who married into farming and are now 50–70 years old; women who entered farming after a life-changing event (such as divorce) who are also 50–70 years old; and women who entered farming relatively early with an equal, committed partner—these women are largely under the age of 40. Methods of land access differ distinctly between these groups. Specifically, cohorts experienced particular social and economic trends affecting how and when they accessed land.

Access through Marriage

The first group, women who married farmers ($n = 4$), accessed land in a way traditional of women in the United States: by marrying men who were conventional-scale, commodity crop farmers. These women have been farming longest and are now mostly in their late 50s and 60s. Because they enjoyed long histories on the farms and in the community, this group of women often mentioned each other and other women who

do a similar type of farming in their interviews—they did not, however, seem to know women on smaller-scale farms in the community. This was the smallest group interviewed. Given that "the structure of U.S. agriculture has become more concentrated and consolidated into fewer and larger farms" (Beach 2013:211), the size of this group reflects broader changes in agriculture. These women were highly educated; all had some college, and two had graduate degrees. Not surprisingly, they had much in common: several mentioned being friends during their interviews. Each woman was born between 1940 and 1960 and each had farmed for at least 25 years. These trends reflect the aging of farmers in general.

What makes this group of women distinct from the others interviewed is that not one woman had desired to farm before marriage. Their memories of entering agriculture focused on romantic notions of following a husband onto the farm after marriage. In the interviews, their stories about how they ended up on farms sounded quite similar. Betty, a 65-year-old woman noted, "I don't think I consciously made a decision. I think the decision was: did I want to marry this person? Yes. And understanding that there's probably not any other option for this person other than we're going to be on this farm. Was I okay with that? Well, it was okay with him, so I was okay with that." She went on to say that as soon as she was married she told her new husband, "I want to be a partner to the extent that I can (having no idea what that meant). And he said, 'great.' And I said, 'okay that's what we'll do.' So we went on our honeymoon and came back the next day and started spring work."

Glenda, a 52-year-old, grew up farming, but had left her small community. She joked that she ended up farming because "well, I married this guy who was in the midst of it!" before she broke into laughter. She continued, "you sort of think about yourself . . . visualize yourself in that setting. I was having a really tough time thinking about myself in that setting. I didn't think I could do that." Importantly these women transitioned from "falling in love with a farmer" to thriving on the farm as farmers in their own right. Immediately after Glenda mentioned she was "having a really tough time thinking about [her]self in that setting," she added, "and, now I'm here doing it, and I can't imagine being any place else. . . . I've never been this happy and I certainly am never as happy as I am when I'm actually at the farm."

These women did not just come to love farm life; they also contributed their labor to the success of the farm and developed niches that utilized their particular skill set. Thus, though these women married into farm families and had not necessarily planned for a life in farming, they are now active and important contributors to the farm and the farm

community. Specifically, two women were active as professional farm advocates and have both been recognized at the state and national levels for their work. The other two women became integral to creating new economic opportunities on the farm.

The women were also responsible for the copious paperwork and networking that they did to have their farms certified by Sustainable Commodity Crops Inc., a company that buys commodity crops that are raised using strict environmental and social criteria. In every case, the farms were doing nearly everything needed to qualify, but it was the women who learned about the program (from other farm women) and who did the paperwork for certification, a process that they must do every year.

Across all the women in this group, the women worked to bring additional attention and resources to the farm. These women grew plants that complemented what was already growing on the farm and that filled niches in the local economy. One woman started a business raising poultry on the steep hillsides of the farm, which are at high risk for soil erosion with typical planting methods. In addition to raising poultry, she teaches classes for local children about farming. Another woman grows 20 tons of peas and beans in the boggy areas where the commodity crops would not grow and then sells them at farmers' markets and local stores.

The women, despite marrying into farming and not making a conscious decision to farm, are active and involved in important ways, indicating that marrying into a farm family does not necessarily limit a woman's involvement. However, the women's earliest years on the farm often sounded very much like the lives of married farm women described by researchers in the 1980s—they often managed the books, had little decision-making power, were responsible for the majority of reproductive labor, and didn't see themselves as farmers (Rosenfeld 1985; Sachs 1983).

In this way, the successes of these women along with the obstacles they face reflect the social and economic contexts since their entrance into farming. These four women came of age during the second wave of the women's movement, and their attitudes (and their husbands') are reflective of women's general increased labor market participation in that period. Thus, the success of these women was tied to their access to education as well as land. The women had educational backgrounds that opened up opportunities to them. The women who started their own operations on the farms both had successful careers before venturing into this new field. Thus, their educations and work experiences were instrumental to their ability to expand their roles on the farm.

Furthermore, each woman described now having decision-making power on the farm, and having encouragement from their husbands to explore opportunities around the farm. This new responsibility included everything from increasing the farm's revenue to pursuing more sustainable farm techniques to finding self-fulfillment. The attitudes of their husbands clearly reflect changing ideas about gender, marriage, and equity that emerged with the women's rights movement in the 1970s, although it is difficult to say if this represents a trend among male farmers.

Despite the support of well-intentioned husbands, however, the women in this group were responsible for more care labor than their husbands. Reflective of Allen and Sach's (2007:5) claim that "women have been expected to support the farm, men, and children ahead of their own needs or aspirations" and because of the age of the women in this group, care work for aging relatives was especially relevant. The women gained decision-making power on the farms as they grew more experienced. However, this decision-making power also corresponded with an increasing amount of care work for their aging parents and in-laws. The two women who began their operations on the farms only started these operations after their in-laws had passed away and they had the latitude to begin these enterprises.

These experiences, however, seem to have made the women more aware of intergenerational conflict on the farm and supportive of the next generation of farm women. Though the women receive support from their husbands, they all either mentioned or alluded to feeling somewhat constrained in the beginning as the "new daughter-in-law." In an aspect of multigenerational farming that has not been deeply explored, all the women discussed that while they liked and respected their in-laws, it was challenging to find their own role on the farm as a daughter- or sister-in-law.

Since these women had been part of a farm succession themselves, each had given thought to what would happen to their farms. Unsurprisingly, they hoped to pass their farms down to children. One woman in the midst of transitioning her farm to her son and daughter-in-law spoke empathetically about the steps she and her husband had taken to make the transition smooth. She had gone as far as seeking professional help to ensure her daughter-in-law had space to grow on the farm. Furthermore, she and her husband had recently moved off the farm, allowing the new generation to live in the farmhouse because she wanted to give them space to change the farm as they saw necessary.

The fact that most of their conflict came from intergenerational struggles with in-laws suggests that this conflict was tied to an inheritance

system that privileged sons and patriarchal power on farms that had a new generation of women eager to leave a mark. The women were keenly aware of these issues and were actively working to avoid creating the same situations for their actual or potential daughters-in-law. Betty especially noted attending succession-planning workshops to help transition the farm to the next generation. When discussing her son and daughter-in-law, she noted, "I believe in transparency and I think all the kids need to understand why we are making the decisions that we're making and to have a voice in that decision making process."

Access Later in Life through Personal Savings and Retirement

The second group (n = 8) included women who long dreamed of farming, but came to it later in life (usually after age 40) as part of a broader transitional time in their life course. They are generally in the same age cohort as the women who married farmers (50–65 years old), come from similar backgrounds, and have similar education levels. They, however, often began farming after a divorce. These women typically entered farming after successful careers, and farming for them is the fulfillment of a long-held dream. This group was most likely to access small plots of land without significant financial help from a male partner. Furthermore, these women entered farming after their responsibilities for child care diminished. These women readily identify as "sustainable farmers." Readily identifying as a farmer is likely related to the fact that these women made the decision to farm, typically with their own capital—thus breaking down the dichotomy of men as farmers and women as helpers (Sachs 1983).

Despite growing up at the same time as the first group of women in similar suburban and urban areas and having similar educational backgrounds, this second group of women stood in stark contrast to the first group in how they accessed land. Moreover, although they lived in a small, rural area, these two groups of women seemed to have little contact and knowledge of what the other group was doing. Perhaps because they entered farming later in life, many of them did not receive any mentorship from other farm women. This separation is perhaps due to different opportunities between the two groups and the divergent paths to farming taken by the women. Most of the women in this group entered farming without substantial financial help from a partner. Thus, while the structural and cultural changes brought by second-wave feminism may have opened doors on conventional-scale farms for the first group of women, the economic advancement of women (particularly white, educated women) that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s is

reflected in the number of women who started farming after they were 40 without significant farming experience.

What links this group of women is largely how and when they accessed farmland. Typically, these women began farming at a crossroads in their lives, including divorce, job loss, or retirement. Importantly, these women all had financial reserves such as savings, retirement, or inheritance that allowed them to buy a small plot of land. Moreover, the fact that land in Sunset County is fertile but relatively inexpensive was a significant draw to many women.

Hillary's story demonstrates this form of land access. After postponing our interview to help in kidding a distressed doe (the doe and kid were fine), the 62-year-old woman described how she followed a male partner to the state some 20 years earlier. Her experience of animal husbandry was limited to the dog she had as a child growing up in the suburbs; nevertheless, after her relationship ended, she decided to rent land and began raising livestock. Hillary said, "I knew within a year: oh yeah, this is what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. It's time to buy a farm. Of course land prices are astronomical so I just started spreading a wider net and ended up down here." When asked how she was able to buy the land she said, "I saved, saved, and saved, and saved, and saved. But, I inherited some money and that was the deciding factor in being able to buy 65 acres and not 25. So yes, it was a combination of my own labor and inheritance." She has hired people to assist during busy periods, but has otherwise done all the work on the farm alone.

Many of the women in this group were farming after divorcing and then remarrying another man who was more interested in the idea of farming—or who was at least more open to the idea of the woman following her desire to farm—in contrast to the women in the previous group who entered farming by marrying farmers. The women in this second group accessed land after a major life change, such as divorce, whereas for women in the first group who married farmers, a major life change like divorce would likely mean the end of their relationship to farming, or at least a radical change in that relationship. For example, one woman who had married a farmer nearly canceled our interview because she was no longer sure she qualified as a "farmer" because she was divorcing. Women who marry farmers, then, experience a somewhat tenuous relationship to the land. Despite their work and value on the farm, in the case of divorce it is "his family farm."

Among women who accessed land using their savings based on their personal desire to farm, most of the women were married to men; but it

was the woman who wanted to farm and led the couple (or couple and children) into farming. Furthermore, in most cases, they did the majority of the farm chores and labor. Despite an age gap of close to 20 years between some of the women, the reoccurring theme in this group was a desire to "start over."

Pam was in her early 40s (and was the youngest woman in this group). She was raising herbs, which her husband supported, but did not assist with. The couple had little drawing them to the area; instead, they were looking to get out of a "bad" situation in another state. In discussing how they were able to purchase the land, Pam noted that "the fact that I have a documented VA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] disability, and so I have tax-free income" allowed them to purchase land despite her husband's low credit score.

Women's income and savings in addition to a strong desire to farm was a thread that pulled this group together. At 72 years old, Naomi was the oldest woman interviewed; yet her story was similar to Pam's in that it was her money that purchased the land. Earnings from a successful career and smart investments in housing allowed her and her husband to move to the area after they retired some 20 years earlier. Naomi noted that her husband "didn't own anything." Her husband's considerable knowledge of plants proved particularly important in what and how the couple chose to farm their land, but she purchased the farm.

Other women in this group also were able to acquire farmland after successful careers and selling property in more affluent areas. For example, Julie, a 59-year-old woman, had been farming for about 14 years. She acquired land after selling a home she owned before she married and had bought with a professional income, which was in a higher-priced area of the country. When her husband got a job in Sunset County, they sold that house. She noted, "back then you had to put the money back into another house or you had to pay capital gains, so we were frantically trying to find a place we didn't pay on. We bought like 20 something acres."

Not all the women in this group accessed land only through their own savings or earnings. Several women combined resources with a male partner; however, all these women did so after a life-altering event—generally divorce—and remarried men who were somewhat interested in farming. But these women made it clear part of their decision to remarry was finding a partner who supported their ambitions. For example, 71-year-old Violet's story details the shifts that women experienced in the last 70 years. Born in the 1940s, she attended college where she met her now ex-husband. When he went on to do doctoral fieldwork outside the country, she went with him. In the process, she raised two

children and cared for the home, while also typing up and proofreading her husband's graduate work and doing lab work for him. The family eventually settled in the area for her husband's job. She continued to work in his lab and help him with research. During middle age he asked her for a divorce. It did not seem to be a happy relationship, but after she had supported his work for 20 years, being left with a paltry income and retirement was embittering. She eventually married a man who also enjoyed farming and the two combined their retirement incomes and bought land where together they raise livestock.

Sharon, a 60-year-old woman, was also only able to live her farm dream after a divorce. She noted that she was living in a different state with two young children when she met her current husband. She had only visited Sunset County, but part of her decision to marry was that he was also interested in the idea of farming in the area.

Kathy, a 61-year-old woman, had a friend who lived up here and encouraged her to visit. She had also remarried a man who was interested in farming, but not necessarily in Sunset County. The two of them used their joint savings and income to buy the land. She discussed moving here to farm, "as something that we just felt," but then continues, "I felt it more than Robert. He sort of felt dragged here in a sense. He wasn't quite giving up the idea of North York, but I just couldn't see a way, and he finally made the leave with me."

The women in this group were linked by important similarities that made land access and farming a possibility for them. For one, they are white and particularly well educated, increasing their earning in the labor market. Furthermore, their peak work years occurred during the period when women's wages and participation in the workplace increased rapidly (1970s–1990s). They also benefited from the economic gains of that same period, specifically in property values. Furthermore, because they accessed land later in life, none of them dealt with the demands of parenting a young child or infant while starting their farms.

The drawback to this form of land access is that many of these women are finding it increasingly difficult to complete the physical labor necessary to farm because of their age. They are at a crossroads about what will happen to their farms when they can no longer do that labor. A number of the oldest women in the group said they are planting smaller plots and selling off livestock as they deal with the emotional pain of considering what will become of a farm they worked so hard to build. Particularly in Sunset County, there is a strong possibility that their certified organic land will be sold or rented and once again be plowed over for industrially produced commodity crops.

Land Access as Young Women with a Male Partner

The third group of women are typically younger and entered farming with a male partner ($n = 5$). This group had, early in their lives (before 30), made farm ownership a central focus of their attention and were drawn to male partners with a similar desire. They share many of the same beliefs about farming as the older women who farm small plots—yet perhaps because of the age differences, this group of women often mentioned one another (and other similarly aged farm women) in their interviews but didn't seem to know women from the other groups. They also readily identified as "sustainable" farmers and run similarly sized, small-acreage farms. This group often accessed farmland fairly young by pooling their somewhat limited resources and (sometimes) family inheritances with a male partner who also dreamed of farming. However, due to limited economic resource, some women in this group rented rather than owned land. These women's farms are shared partnerships with their husbands.

These women share striking similarities with the women who accessed land later in life with less support of a male partner. These similarities begin with their motivations to farm and their histories with farming. Both these groups of women talked about gardening beside grandmothers or parents who had left farms to get away from the work but nonetheless taught them to prune fruit trees in their yards, or even about loveable family pets who seemed to "get" them. Many people, however, have nice dogs as kids or sweet grandmothers who grow tomatoes; yet most people do not grow up to be (or retire to be) farmers. Thus, these are important explanatory stories for the women, but these moments ignited something in them that such memories do not in most people.

The vast majority of all three groups of women farm with a male partner, yet this last group of women is different from the others in important ways. They benefited from the "girls can do anything" rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s. But perhaps reflecting the stagnating growth among women's earnings since the mid-1990s, these women have less capital to contribute to buying their farms and thus are more likely to rely on male earnings to support their farms. Furthermore, because they are younger, they are also attempting to combine intense farm labor with caring for young children and infants.

The women in this group certainly have benefits over the older generation. First, they can count on mentorship from the older women. Second, they benefit from an economic market that was largely created by the previous generation. For example, in Sunset County there are a number of well-established and successful farmers' markets, which was not the case when the older women started farming here. Third, because

this group of women didn't wait to start their farms (in part because they had a better vision of what was available to them) they have younger bodies in an occupation that is physically demanding. In fact, these women all described the physical stamina required to build up their farms.

Of the five women in this group, four were between 30 and 41, while the fifth woman was 66 years old but seemed a closer fit with this group than the other group for reasons that will become clear. What draws this group together is a desire to farm since they were young and a plan to do so. This group grew up in the same suburban and urban areas as all the other women, and they had no more experience with farming than the other women, but they felt called to farming from a young age and started farming before the age of 30, with the exception of one woman who spent her 20s saving money to farm.

But even this woman, 42-year-old Paige, who had been farming for six years with her husband, made a conscious decision to farm and began organizing her life according to that goal. For example, she discussed saving up money for about a decade and mentioned that "we didn't start a family until later, which was very planned." Thus, the women in this group did not begin farming after a life-changing event; rather they planned their lives around the idea of farming.

The three youngest women in the group also sought out opportunities to work as interns on other sustainable farms both in the United States and abroad—opportunities that were simply not available to the previous group. Moreover, unpaid internships are opportunities not everyone has the option of taking, suggesting a level of privilege to be able to work without being paid.

This group of women is also distinct in that all of them married men (the first time) who were equally interested in farming. In fact, the three who did internships did them with their partners. Pooling together often quite meager savings and earnings, the women are all making a go of farming as full-time jobs. Furthermore, they tend to start small and slowly cobble together land. And with the exception of "odd jobs," these women do not work off their farms. Thus, these farms look different from the other women's farms, and the women tend to be drawn to highly labor intensive farming, for example, growing row crops rather than raising livestock. Although the woman who did raise livestock was using a labor-intensive practice of "mob grazing"[3] to do so, because they entered farming as young and very healthy people, it makes sense that

[3] "Mob grazing" is the practice of putting a high concentration of cattle on a small plot of land for a short time and moving them frequently to give the grass ample time to rest and regrow.

they had approached farming from this angle. The women who entered farming after they retired or while still working full time likely have less labor time and less physical stamina to devote to farming.

In general, this group of women was not as financially well off as the other women. Their homes were smaller, draftier, and more likely to be filled with boxes of produce as opposed to more typical middle-class décor. They had cobbled their farms together through their personal savings and from family inheritances. Rachel, a 66-year-old woman and self-described "hippie," had moved around the country as a young woman farming. She remembered, "it was very cheap land back then. . . . It was only $3,000 for 11 acres and a one-room cabin with a loft, so I lived up in the tiny loft there off the grid. I grew an amazing garden." She came to this area on the advice of a friend and met a man she later married. They both inherited a small amount of money from their families and together bought 11 acres of land in Sunset County. They raised their children, who were born in a teepee on the farm.

Alice, a 37-year-old woman who'd been farming for 10 years, moved to town with her husband and rented land and a house that was eventually demolished. They also inherited some money, which they combined with their own savings from "living an unbelievably frugal lifestyle" to buy their small farm. Her husband currently works off the farm for additional income and health insurance.

This reliance on the husband's off-farm income and additional family support was a reoccurring theme across this group. For example, in addition to Alice's husband, Paige's husband and Rachel's husband also worked off the farm for health insurance and additional income. Furthermore, Alice and Rachel had also inherited what they described as small sums of money, but the amounts were substantial enough to make down payments on land. In addition, Lindsey, a 32-year-old woman, was farming on land that a family member purchased. In fact, Lindsey seemed a bit uncomfortable with the idea that she had not "earned" the land she was farming. Yet the amount of work she and her husband were doing was absolutely staggering. Though these women hoped to get their farms to a point where they were self-reliant as farmers, at the time of the interviews all but one were at least partially reliant on someone else's off-farm earnings to support the farm.

The only woman who was not in this position was 30-year-old Ellen, who was farming with her husband on rented land spread around the county. Both had recently quit their off-farm jobs and were attempting to support themselves completely on their farm income. She and her husband were living incredibly frugally and were using fairly unconventional methods to accumulate more land. For example, they were

growing tomatoes in people's yards and paying their water bills. As full-time farmers, Ellen and her husband were without health insurance.

The challenge of farming and mothering threaded throughout the interviews. Because the women started farming earlier in life, each one (except Ellen) had or was attempting to mother infants and young children in addition to her farm labor. The two women who currently had infants or toddlers related the real challenges involved. Lindsey described "the casualty of having a baby" was that some of her crops died that summer. Another mentioned how much less work she was able to do with her children in tow. The two who retrospectively remembered farming with infants and toddlers had a more halcyon tone, but still recalled the challenges of weeding with a baby strapped to their backs.

Given that the wage gap for women has been stagnant since the mid-1990s and that these women spent less time in pre-farming careers, it is not surprising that they have fewer resources to buy farms. They are overcoming this obstacle in a variety of ways, but the majority of them require off-farm income from someone in the family—in this group, all men. Furthermore, they have all assumed the primary child-care responsibilities, putting tremendous pressure on the women with the youngest children. While these women have found marriages where both partners share similar goals to farm, these women seem to be in particularly vulnerable positions if their marriages or farms fail. Specifically, all the farms except Ellen's require a man's off-farm income to operate. Furthermore, because the women are working as full-time farmers, if they are no longer able to farm, they may have difficulty finding employment off the farm.

Conclusion

The fact that more women are working as farmers is well established, but the differences in how women access farmland is not well known. Much research on women in agriculture argues that women enter sustainable agriculture because of a belief in the superiority of sustainable practices—something many of the women in this project asserted as well. Yet this project complicates those assertions. Clarifying the strategies women use to access farmland suggests that the women entering farming are doing so with limited capital and, unless they marry into farming, are left to farm small-acreage farms—farms that are best suited to sustainable production. Realizing the limited opportunities facing women, then, is essential to understanding the trends in women's farming and how economic and educational gains made by women have translated into the field of farming. Understanding these limits also suggests that a

decision to enter sustainable farming is at least partially a financial decision based on these women's limited resources.

This project specifically points to the ways different structural opportunities for women have allowed these women to access land. Women in group 1, who married into a farm family, highlight the role that marriage continues to play in land access. Though they were very successful in their own right, finding these roles on the farm was certainly not immediate and often took place after they tended to the responsibilities of raising children and caring for elderly family members. Women in group 2, whose prime working years came during the greatest period of economic growth for women—the 1980s–mid 1990s—are much more likely to have bought their own farms and have significant control over the operations. The fact that these women bought land means that they did not have to care for aging in-laws who lived on the farm with them. Furthermore, for those with children, they accessed land after the most intensive periods of mothering had passed. By contrast, the women from group 3 accessed land through marriage and bought land with a male partner as younger women. While the young women who accessed farmland cooperatively with their husbands seem to be in contrast to women of the baby boom who married farmers, there are some important overlaps in their experience.

This group of women who accessed farmland young are highly reliant on the earnings of men to support the farms. While their experiences are certainly different from the women in the first group, the importance of a marriage to land access cannot be overlooked. For the third group of women the fact that the women do not independently own the farms and are also not employed off the farms (as all their husbands are) makes them particularly vulnerable as a group to the effects of a life-changing event like divorce, disability, or death of a husband. As a consequence, the youngest women, who came of age during a period of an attitude that "girls can do anything!" but also a period of wage stagnation for women (and men), are as reliant on their husbands for the success of the farm as the women who married farmers and had no intention of farming as young women. Thus, larger structural economic opportunities may affect the roles and opportunities for women. In other words, young women seem to be more reliant on men's earnings to farm than older women are.

Thus, research on women's entrée into farming must be cautious of creating narratives that suggest women's land access is necessarily a progressive narrative or time line. As Glenda, a farmer from group 1, notes, "for most women, I don't think [farming is] an opportunity that ever presents itself. If you really think about it, just the whole of idea of

being a young person and deciding you want to be a farmer, that's not really an option that's available to most people. Everybody now, either you need to inherit it or you need to marry into it to be able to be a farmer. Because it's true, there's not a lot of land available to farm."

While her perspective overlooks the variety of the paths that women find to accessing land to farm, it also reminds us just how tenuous and difficult women's futures as farmers may be. Given the important role women play in sustainable agriculture, their success or failure in accessing the land to farm may well be the bellwether for sustainable agriculture more broadly.

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