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The Rise of American Women In Agriculture

Men have dominated the agricultural industry in America since the birth of the nation. When farms were passed down through the family, it was more than often the men in the younger generations who would inherit the farms, despite the fact that women also worked the land. The social expectations put on women to tend to small gardens and “nice” farming have been perpetuated by the pressure for women to feel confined to this more delicate way of life, compared to male farmers who have conveyed stereotypical exhibitions of masculinity by physically dominating the land with tractors and other large agricultural machinery. This stemmed both from engendered interactions with nature and from a strong patriarchal society where women were not expected to do hard labor on farms. However, within the last twenty years or so, women have begun to visibly increase their influence and control over the agricultural industry and have proven themselves just as capable as their male counterparts in managing farms. Though still highly underrepresented in reports the USDA publishes, female farmers are pushing their way into the public eye, and it is evident they are becoming key players in a changing agricultural landscape with the rise of a younger generation of farmers.

In 2000, *Love v. Vilsack*, a class action lawsuit filed against the USDA for discriminatory practices against women farmers seeking loans, gained traction,

calling to attention the USDA's favor toward male farmers.¹ This was just the beginning of a conversation that has lasted over a decade concerning how female farmers are left out of the agricultural sphere. Before 2002, the USDA Census of Agriculture did not include or seek extensive information on the demographic of female farmers, therefore not representing them accurately. For example, farmer Sondra Peirce works on a family farm with her husband, though he has a separate job five days a week off the farm in order to provide enough income to keep them afloat. Nonetheless, most of their produce is sold under his name, so he gets the recognition of being the primary operator of the land.² This unfair credit not only discounts her as an individual female farmer, but it perpetuates the outdated concept of male dominance on all farms.

In the state of Vermont, only 22.38 percent of principle operators on farms are women, though they make up 39.14 percent of the primary workforce on all the state's farms.³ Within Addison County, the USDA reports that just 24 percent of the farmers are women. Though this may seem dismal for female farmers, the USDA finds women make up 30.2 percent of the all farm operators in America.⁴ This provides hope for women, like Sondra, in agriculture, as this is a 19 percent increase from the 2002 census, showing that women are rapidly increasing and expanding

¹ "Love v. Vilsack." Women Farmers Litigation. November 26, 2013. Accessed May 15, 2015.

² Runyon, Luke. "Women Have Always Been Farmers, Now They're Being Counted." Harvest Public Media: Cultivating Stories from the Ground up. November 19, 2014.

³ "Vermont State and Country Data." *2012 Census of Agriculture*, vol. 1 (2012). Accessed May 15, 2015.

⁴ "Women Farmers." *2007 Census of Agriculture*, 2007. Accessed May 13, 2015.

their power within a male dominated field.⁵ This is also supported by the statistic that 79 percent of the farmers in Vermont are older than 45, indicating that within the next twenty years almost all of the farms will be in the hands of a younger generation comprised of significantly more women than the current farm owners.⁶

Despite their growing influence, an obstacle many female farmers across the country face in the present is the location of their farms, specifically when surrounded by male farmers in rural areas. The Midwest, a region filled with rich farmland, has the lowest number of female farmers.⁷ For the few female farmers making a living on this land, it can be frustrating to be successful in what are often traditionally old-value communities. Lavinia "Vinnie" McKinney, a veteran farmer of 42 years, lives on a biodynamic and organic farm in Ozark County, Missouri, the poorest county in the state. She has found that over the years the poverty in the surrounding area has created a generally ignorant and incredibly conservative population. Already living in isolation, Vinnie says "integrating into the community has been difficult and challenging because there is a lot of pushback from traditionally male-led farming families based on the fact that I am a woman."⁸ When she first moved to her farm in 1973, the back-to-the-land movement was still going strong. However, as many of her young farmer friends in the area returned to cities,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Race/Ethnicity/Gender Profile." *2012 Census of Agriculture*, 2012.

⁷ "Women Farmers." *2012 Census of Agriculture: Highlights*, 2012. Accessed May 13, 2015.

⁸ McKinney, Lavinia. "Vinnie: A Woman Farmer." Telephone interview by author. May 10, 2015.

she was left stranded, fighting alone against a community that does not reflect her values as a farmer and as an individual.

The lack of respect on the basis of gender between farmers in her area has tested Vinnie and countless other women like her all over the country, but it has also spurred a positive movement to advocate for the rapidly growing demographic female farmers through programs and organizations, like the Women, Food & Agriculture Network. A large part of the success of women in farming has been because of initiatives taken to create communities focused on educating women about various agricultural occupations and promoting supportive networks and resources to help women develop physical skills. Women, Food, & Agriculture Network was started in 1997 in an effort to “remedy the absence of women’s voices in food and agricultural issues”⁹ Currently they support women by connecting them through apprenticeships, providing information on sustainability and conservation methods, and promoting advocacy in policy at the state and federal levels.¹⁰

In today’s society it is vital that these kinds of programs exist as a new wave of back-to-the-land farming has started to emerge. These programs not only allow women to gain access to agriculture and food policy, but they also foster ideals and beliefs that are highly valued by the younger, often more liberal, farming generation. These values manifest themselves in a rapidly growing wave of sustainable organic agriculture, led foremost by the younger generation, burdened with the task of

⁹ "About Us." Women, Food, & Agriculture Network: Growing Together. 2015.
Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹⁰ Ibid.

cleaning up the pesticide-ridden mess of the food industry created by previous generations.

So far, a trend followed by many is the concept of a young couple moving to a rural, northeastern plot of land and starting off small. From Middlebury College, '04.5 graduate Bennett Konesni, co-founder of the Middlebury College Organic Farm, and his partner Edith Gawler own Sylvester Manor, an educational farm in New York.¹¹ Additionally, Big Picture Farm, owned by Lucas Farrell and Louisa Conrad, was begun in 2010 after the two met at Middlebury College and discovered a mutual interest in farming.¹² Now run as a goat dairy and confectionary employing four interns every year, the couple is not only illustrating how new farmers, specifically women, can be successful, but also how farms can spread positive agricultural influence through apprenticeships. In contrast, straying from the mold of the young farmer couple, Linnea Burnham, '14.5 graduate from Middlebury College, has taken advantage of the types of apprenticeships provided by Big Picture Farm and found her love for artisanal cheesemaking. Awarded with the Watson Fellowship, she will travel this next year to further "understand the relationship between large-scale cheesemaking and the need for sustainable, regional food systems."¹³

A newer, younger generation of farmers is on the rise in America, leading the way to not only better forms of agriculture, but also to a higher quality of gender

¹¹ Konesni, Bennett, and Edith Gawler. "About Us." Edith & Bennett. 2010. Accessed May 13, 2015.

¹² Conrad, Louisa, and Lucas Farrell. "About." Big Picture Farm. 2015. Accessed May 14, 2015.

¹³ "Two Middlebury Febs Selected as Watson Fellows." Middlebury College. March 24, 2015. Accessed May 13, 2015.

representation in agriculture. This is a huge step forward away from the outdated concepts of masculine, “big agriculture” and toward more fulfilling, sustainable, and knowledgeable farming practices. Integral to this is the inclusion of women and the expansion of their authority, both on farms and within the political movement. Over the last decade, Middlebury College has fostered an environment in which this is possible, paving the way for future graduates to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors.

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