

“Am I Enough of a Farmer for You?”

FINDINGS FROM CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN FARMERS ACROSS THE U.S.

According to the most recent Census of Agriculture, more than half (58%) of all U.S. farms have at least one female decision maker.¹ Women farmers currently account for 41% of beginning producers and 36% of all producers.^{1,2} Among all women producers, only a small percentage (12%) focuses on the production of commodity row-crops such as oilseed, grains, cotton, and tobacco. Nonetheless, those growers represent little over a quarter of all farmers growing those crops.³

While these data show that female producers are significant contributors to U.S. agriculture, women still face difficulties being accepted as farmers, especially when it comes to commodity production.^{4,5} We hosted a series of interviews and listening sessions with commodity growers, between February 2021-March 2024, to learn more about the experiences of women farmers in U.S. row-crop commodity agriculture and the role they play in the industry.

This three-part-series will explore what we learned during those conversations and suggest ways to better support women farmers.

U.S. agriculture has historically been framed as a male-dominated industry.⁴ The traditional concept of “family farm” has often revolved around the idea of heterosexual nuclear families with a man “who could acquire, run, operate and tend to land while a woman [...] would] provide a stable home environment that would facilitate her husband’s success as a farmer.”⁵ In this context, women on farms have often been framed as farmwives or farmer’s wives rather than farmers.^{6,7} In reality, women’s contributions to the farm have always been indispensable for the success of the operation, but because of this narrative, they have often been invisible.⁵

Farmwives typically oversaw the financial management (bookkeeping), tended the family’s kitchen garden, took care of the family, and ensured the welfare of small (e.g., chickens) and young (e.g., calves) livestock.⁶ These occupations are often not framed as “farming” and still influence how women are entering and conducting work in the agriculture business.^{6,8} For example,



even though women have long contributed significant labor within U.S. farms, these contributions often go unrecognized, and women themselves often don’t self-identify as farmers.⁷ This phenomenon, as well as the fact that the U.S. Census of Agriculture started collecting data on farmers’ gender only in 1978, might have caused the data on women farmers to be underrepresented over time.⁸ For the first report of this three-part series, we will explore this issue by focusing on *farmer identity*. Through the stories of the over 30 women who participated in our research, we will present both women’s experiences in agriculture and what they think it means to be a farmer in this industry.

INDUSTRY PERCEPTION

As reported by previous research,^{6,7,9,10} many of the women we heard from noted that their identity as farmers is still challenged, and their knowledge and abilities are often under-recognized. People’s perceptions often take the form of:

- **Assuming** that the women are not farmers but that the men in their families and lives are. This happens even in situations where those men have never been involved on the farm.
- **Minimizing** women’s contributions to the farm and their status as farmers.
- **Excluding** women from important conversations and deferring decision-making power to male business partners.

Notably, some women did not share these experiences, rather they felt respected and valued as farmers. “I was always treated as an equal” [Eva, PA].^a And “I’ve never gotten any pushback. [...] I’ve never had anybody question me about whether or not I knew what I was talking about.” [June, MD]^a

^aAll the quotes in this document are presented using pseudonyms.

“ I got told that I just wasn’t enough of a farmer, [...] then I sometimes feel like, and I do this to myself, I feel like I have to justify my farmer status.” [Alice, MO]^a

LEADERSHIP AND TOKENISM

Women are increasingly taking leadership roles in agriculture. They value being involved and acknowledge the opportunities that arise through leadership roles. However, they also frequently find themselves as the first or only woman serving on commodity boards and similar farmer associations. As the sole woman, they sometimes feel like the “poster child” [Rose, SC]^a, who is asked to take on certain responsibilities based on their gender rather than their strengths. Through this approach, organizations risk overlooking an opportunity to improve women’s acceptance and recognition within the industry.

Despite these challenges, women reject being portrayed as “victims.” Instead, they show resiliency and find ways to affirm their role as farmers.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

When asked about their experience as women in agriculture, the farmers we talked to shared the importance of support systems, both through formal programming and personal social networks. They highlighted how receiving support can help build their skills and confidence, as well as provide recognition of their active farming status and capabilities. They often mentioned fathers, husbands, and mentors using their influence to vouch for them with industry and community members, and programs like [Annie’s Project](#), women’s organizations, and fellow female producers providing knowledge and help to establish themselves.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Women producers are challenging what it means to be a farmer by reframing what farm work is. They are shining a light on the hidden work that women often do on farms. Although they frequently go unrecognized, those contributions provide crucial support to the success of the operation. “That’s an old thing where only the person who’s in the tractor every single day [is the farmer]. If you are part of the farm, or you are involved in the farm, whether you do the books or order the seed, or whether you plant the seed or harvest, you are a farmer.” [Joy, MD]^a



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommend women for leadership roles. Having more women in those positions could help signal to the agricultural industry that women farmers are not an exception and provide recognition for their work. This can also help shift people’s assumptions about women’s status as farmers. Additionally, women are not a monolith. While their experiences might be similar, women farmers do not all have the same opinions, backgrounds, and priorities. Having more women in leadership roles can help ensure the full range of voices is represented and brought to the table, thus moving away from instances of tokenism.

Increase and facilitate support systems. Both public and private organizations can play an important role in creating and fostering support systems for women farmers. Among those, there are strong programs that already serve women farmers. Ag advisors (e.g., extension agents, outreach practitioners, private crop advisors, etc.) can become local champions for women farmers—by connecting them with those organizations, helping to expand peer networks, building skills and confidence, and recognizing women’s contributions on the ground.

Change the narrative and highlight women’s contributions to agriculture. Practitioners, trusted advisors, university faculty, and researchers can help shift public assumptions and preconceptions about who a farmer is and what type of work “counts” as farming. These key stakeholders can use their influence to challenge dominant narratives about what it means to be a farmer and recognize the varied contributions that women make in farming operations.

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