

The Work of Caring for Others

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.

In recent years, literature has shown that women in agricultural households are still responsible for the bulk of childcare duties.⁶ Often, caring for children on the farm can endanger children's safety⁷ as well as limit farm businesses' abilities to grow due to competing time and resources.^{8,9} During our listening sessions, we asked women farmers to talk about how care duties, both toward children and other family members, have affected their work and role on the farm. In this second report of our three-part series, we explore their answers and learn what *care work* means to the women farmers we spoke with and how it impacts their opportunities and decision-making.

BALANCING FARMING AND CHILDCARE DUTIES

In alignment with the literature,^{6,8} the work of caring for children was one of the topics that resonated with the women farmers in our research. Experiences with childcare responsibilities varied among those we heard from, but they can be summarized by these five ideas:

- **Taking a step back.** Some of the women in our listening sessions talked about the decision to step back from the day-to-day work of the farming operation when their children were young. While they were still very involved with the farm, they were devoting more time to taking care of their children and family. Nora^a from Iowa explained this, saying, “[Before we had kids,] I did do more tractor driving, and I got my farmer [commercial driver license], ... but then we had little babies. I mean, someone’s got to do that stuff too, and I was working a full-time job. So, [I] ended up not driving as much equipment and doing that sort of thing since then.”
- **Relying on family help.** Several women talked about getting help from close family members to be able to find the time to work on or off the farm. In some instances, family help was critical given the high costs of local childcare options.
- **Getting creative.** A few of the farmers talked about finding ways to keep working while having the children with them. With infants and toddlers, this sometimes meant nursing and pumping while running machinery, or making alterations to combines and tractors to allow

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

them to safely keep children with them. “I had a car seat that would fit on the floor of the combine, and I got to where I could lift that seat up over my head and slide it up on the stairs, and we had installed seatbelts in the tractors so that I could keep the car seats in there, and I would nurse in the combine.” [Paige, IA]^a

- **Changing needs.** Several of the women also talked about how their care work changed as children aged. Some women shared that as their kids got older, they were able to help around the farm, yet having pre-teens and teenagers also meant taking more time off the farm to support them in new ways. Alice [MO]^a explained, “My three oldest are all teenagers, and I thought, ‘Oh, that’ll be so much easier. They can drive, and they can take care of themselves.’” She added, “It is not easier.”
- **Equal work.** Notably, several of the women in our research emphasized their experience of childcare being equally distributed with their partners and not feeling like they carried most of the burden. In the words of Dianne [SC]^a, “My husband changed as many diapers as I did.”

MORE THAN JUST CHILDCARE

When talking about care work, the conversation in our listening sessions expanded beyond childcare to the many other ways in which these women are supporting their families. Two themes, in particular, emerged:

- **Off-farm work.** Several women farmers mentioned the decision to keep an off-farm job—both to provide additional income streams and especially to guarantee access to benefits such as healthcare, retirement, and life insurance for themselves and their families. “I worked about 44 years off the farm, always number one to bring in health insurance.” [Lauren, AL]^a And “For 29 years [...] I worked for our retirement money and our health insurance.” [Dianne, SC]^a
- **Caring for elders.** Some of the women also talked about putting aside work (on farm and off) to care for older family members, such as parents and grandparents. “Life just revolved around [my father-in-law] and caring for him and making life worthwhile for him [...]. So, you know, you prioritize, and I think that’s really important.” [Lauren, AL]^a

Even when requiring trade-offs, women farmers did not resent the care work they did. In fact, they also talked about care work as an opportunity and a way to get closer to the farm and their families.

SUPPORTING THE NEW GENERATION

Many women talked about providing new opportunities for their children, especially off the farm⁹. It was a recurring theme that women hoped their children would become the next generation of farmers, but they did not want to force them into that decision. “I hope I’m raising fifth-generation farmers [...], but at the same time, I need to help them be the people they can be.” [Dorothy, ND]^a

GETTING CLOSER TO FARMING

Finally, a few of the women talked about how caring for children and the desire to be closer to family created a way for them to be more involved in the farming operation or shaped their decision to start farming full-time. “My son is only eight so we’re still very much in the middle of it. But having him is actually what made me get more involved in our farm. He loved being out there, and so that meant I was out there with him. And just being there made me tune into conversations and weigh in on the decisions and help out more, just by forcing myself to be there with my husband, with my son.” [Jane, TX]^a

RECOMMENDATIONS

Invest in improvements to rural community

infrastructure. Improving access to childcare, especially but not only through financial support, could reduce the burden on farming parents and increase the safety of children on farms.⁶ Similarly, increased access to elder care resources would support farmers caring for aging members of their families and communities. Practitioners and trusted advisors can integrate care work into programming focused on farm safety and farm business, thus providing a space to share resources with and among farmers.⁷ Organizations can support [policies that would improve rural infrastructure](#).

Increase and improve the social safety net. Facilitating access to affordable healthcare, retirement options, and life insurance, among other benefits, could give many women the freedom to become full-time farmers without feeling the need to keep an off-the-farm job to provide these critical benefits for themselves and their families. Organizations can support policies at the state and federal level that support the creation or expansion of programs that expand access to affordable social safety net services (i.e., health insurance, retirement, life insurance) that farmers and their families will benefit from.



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