Wives or Workers: Invisibilizing Female Farmers in the United States

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Introduction:

Agriculture has long been the backbone of the United States economy. The country's vast, diverse landscapes and fertile soils offer a unique abundance and have contributed greatly to its historical prosperity. This rich agricultural tradition includes a strong cultural mythology of the "typical" rural agrarian family as a white-European Christians household headed by the male farmer. The result has been the structural suppression of American agrarian and farming communities that do not fit that rigid mold, rendering any non-White, non-male farmer invisible. Recent studies of the US food system that do analyze issues of equity and justice tend to focus on the consumption end of the supply chain. What is less studied are the realities for socially disadvantaged producers, despite a growing recognition that, "the farm economy and farm policy works far better for some than others, and access to federal resources is far from equitable, including blatant discrimination against African American, Latino, Native American, Asian American and women farmers" (Ackerman et al, 2012, p. 1).

US farm policy, to date, has largely ignored the needs and concerns of non-White and women farmers, itself falling into the trap of American agrarian mythology. The major piece of agricultural legislation — the United States Farm Bill — was first drafted during the farm crisis of the 1930s and is reassessed and reauthorized every five to seven years (Imhoff, 2007). It was "one of the most ambitious social, cultural, and economic programs ever attempted by the U.S. government," and addressed multiple issues along the food supply chain simultaneously (ibid., p. 34). The Outreach and Assistance Program for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (OASDFR) was adopted in the 1990 Farm Bill and significantly expanded in 2008 (Rural Coalition Pamphlet, 2012). Currently, passage of the 2012 Farm Bill has been stalled, with numerous programs such as OASDFR at risk of losing much, if not all, of their funding (Wilde, 2011). The program was designed to ensure equitable delivery of services and assistance for vulnerable and marginalized groups, who bear the greatest risk of significant cuts. One of these groups is women farmers.

To understand the risks and vulnerabilities of female farmers today, one has to understand their marginalization in US agricultural history. The evolution of agriculture and agribusiness through industrialization and conglomeration has resulted in a hegemonic masculinization of farming, and subsequently rendered women farm operators and farmworkers invisible. Fink (1988) puts the reality succinctly, saying "the magnitude of women's input and its centrality to farm production have not been carefully assessed precisely because such an analysis would reveal fundamental contradictions in a system that used women so fully but evaluated and rewarded them so meagerly" (p. 55). Today, a class action lawsuit by female and Hispanic farmers seeks to address and resolve past discriminatory practices by the United States Department of

Agriculture. This lawsuit illustrates the ongoing struggle of women farmers to have their work valued and to be viewed as what they are: farmers.

Women in US Agriculture — From Farmers to Farm Wives

The feminist, gender-equality, and women's rights movements have accomplished great success over the past few decades in uplifting the voices of urban women. Urban and suburban women have made great strides in breaking the rigid roles and glass ceilings that once held them strictly to household and reproductive duties. This has allowed them to both enter the workforce — and subsequently opened the door for men to remain in the home — and demand that household responsibilities be recognized as valuable work. These lines are blurry, however, in rural farming communities in which the household and workplace tasks are difficult to differentiate.

Haney & Knowles (1988), still a predominant literature on the subject today, found that two main issues underlie historical letters and speeches of farm women: "the need for the providers of agricultural services to recognize the multiple and overlapping roles of farm women — particularly their involvement in the farm enterprise and the rural community...[and] a desire to be recognized as capable leaders by the male-dominated agricultural leadership and by policymakers and providers of agricultural and rural services" (p. 6). Women have molded the agricultural history of the United States, yet are predominately excluded from the agricultural production discourse. Even after an organized women's rights movement succeeded in gaining the right for women to hold land title, men have continued to control most agricultural land.

The transition from the iconic small-scale, family farm to the capital-intensive industrial farming of today included an under-emphasized, but re-entrenched gendering of the farm system and greatly altered the lives and perception of agricultural women. V.S. Fink (1988) argues that both manual labor and women's work tend be made invisible in American society. In this way, the work of farm and ranch women is doubly so. In the early 1900s women were still recognized as important, productive members of the farm enterprise (Elbert, 1988). But an emerging agri-system believed progress was achieved "through a functional gender separation of spheres" (ibid., p. 250). Men in production and women in reproduction was the best path to abundance and progress (ibid.).

This created a struggle for farm-women trying to maximize their productive roles in a system that perceived women's productive labor as the last remnant of primitive cultures. Rural women demanded access to research publications and advice on achieving productive autonomy within their farm enterprise. Land grant institutions began to offer Reading Courses for Farmer's Wives, a distinct institutionalization of the notion that a woman's ideal role is as wife. This was further ingrained as the departments and courses transformed into Home Economics departments focusing on resources and courses related to child care, interior design, food preparation, laundry, and a woman's civic responsibilities (ibid). Cornell's director, Liberty Hyde Bailey, addressed the Girl's Club in the College of Agriculture with the following:

> "it is to be expected that [a woman's] best contribution will be to create a quickened sentiment in respect to the homemaking and householding end of country life, I do not mean to restrict women's activities, but we must recognize the law of nature that certain activities are primary and others are secondary...Whatever a woman may gain, she must never lose her domesticity" (ibid, p. 257, additions in original).

This cultural shift is best evidenced in the experiences of Native Americans responding and adapting to the external imposition of White agricultural gender norms. Janiewsky (1988) argues that packaged within the American agricultural paradigm was a particular vision of correct economic relationships. Underlying this economic model for agriculture was a rigid set of assumptions regarding gender dynamics — in particular, the male as primary provider, citizen, household head, property-owner, manager, and public representative of the family. The Dawes Act (Indian Allotment Act) of 1887 solidified the imposition of gender norms via government policy on communities that had not previously conformed. Seeking to break up the potential power of tribal communities, the act gave each man title to an allotment of land with the mandate to work that land to produce crops, successfully undermining previously communal property regimes and imposing individual possession. Advocates of the Dawes Act at the time supported its general goal of transforming Indian males into real, productive men. In tandem, the Women's National Indian Association took on the role of teaching Native American women to properly keep a comfortable home, supposedly saving them from heavy fieldwork and manual labor for which their proclivities were allegedly ill-suited (Janiewsky, 1998).

The Bureau of Indian Affairs and USDA embodied and disseminated the attitude that men were the only appropriate farmers. Any women that continued to farm were rendered invisible insofar as agricultural services and trainings were concerned. This is succinctly summarized by Janiewski (1988):

> "An analysis of a century and more of policy, designed and implemented as though only men could farm, reveals how deeply rooted is our definition of the farmer as the *man* who takes a wife. Women, in effect, have been defined as objects, rather than subjects in the long agricultural tradition to which we are heir. Policy based upon that male-defined agricultural pattern can never give women the consideration or the resources they need" (p. 49, italics in original).

Policies and programs in the later 20th century were designed and implemented under the coupled ideas that only men could farm and the ideal, proper woman should not farm.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these shifting roles, women pleaded for access to publications and advice on the means to productive autonomy within the farm enterprise. However, agricultural institutions were leading the way toward highly industrialized agriculture, "which they argued would produce an abundance for market sufficient to make a woman's productive skills and their desire for autonomy superfluous. A 'modern' industrial model of agricultural production would necessitate expert homemakers" (Elbert, 1988, p. 251). What resulted was a reformation of training and extension programs for farm women

toward a newly developed, unpaid, and unlicensed pseudo-profession: that of the housewife. Land grant institutions slowly transformed their Reading Courses for Farmers Wives into the first Home Economics Departments, a profession available only to one sex. One reading course pamphlet was entitled "The Life of Primitive Women" and emphasized, "that women's labor in fields and in home production was an important but unenviable early stage of human evolution. Higher civilizations were marked by gender specialization and separate spheres; women's highest role was — professional homemaking" (ibid., p. 256). This marked the beginning of a separation of the family farm into the distinct, gender-specific spheres of farm enterprise and farm household.

As farms increased in scale, agriculture shifted again from a male head of household serving as boss over the family labor force to viewing the farm as no longer requiring the services of the wife or children (Elbert, 1988). The "capitalization, specialization, and mechanization after WWII reduced women's position in food production, and to a large extent, made their work on the farm superfluous, turning farming into a male occupation" (Brandth, 2002, p. 110). As agriculture transitioned to a capital-intensive, industrial system, statisticians and economists began to consider the farm work force as only consisting of adult males, and any work done by other household members as not being farm work. When farmers, male and female, quantified production inputs as required by the USDA Extension Service, they typically did not factor in any labor contributions of women, even if that consisted of poultry operations, livestock chores, or fieldwork (V.S. Fink, 1988). This demonstrates the extent to which gender perceptions and normative values of men's and women's work pervaded the agricultural system. Not only was a women's proper place not in the productive aspects of the farming business, but any contributions a woman may have made in this area simply did not count.

In a study of farm women in Pennsylvania, interviews revealed that many women perceived themselves as contributing very little to the farm operation and only helping when needed. One woman claimed to not "help a lot," then went on to acknowledge that: "I care for the calves and bottle-feed them. Every day, I carry the milk out. Also, I drive the tractor when he [her husband] needs me. I shovel corn at harvest time. During haymaking, I'm out there every day. And sometimes I work in the fields" (Sachs, 1988, p. 127, brackets in original). This quote highlights the incredible disparity between the level women are perceived to contribute to agricultural production and the great amount of work they actually do contribute. Since the time of Sachs' research, and despite the effort of feminists to highlight the economic contributions of women, there persists an overall cultural perception of "farmer" as White male that must be challenged.

In the same study, a major activity mentioned by many women was gardening. All of the participating farm households raised gardens that often served a dual purpose of family food supply and market production. According to Sachs (1988), "Eighteen of the twenty-four households produced over forty percent of the family food supply on their farms. Women reported that they had the major responsibility for the garden in twenty-two of the twenty-four

households" (p. 130). Despite the contributions these gardens provided to household food security, as well as serving as a source of income by marketing vegetables, the work was considered a hobby rather than part of the productive farm business. This highlights a discourse and perception that remains extremely pervasive among the American public today, namely that men are farmers and women are gardeners.

One reason for this is that as the agro-industry has modernized, small-scale livestock and food production operations were not viewed as contributing to intensive capital accumulation or commercial expansion, two primary goals of the modern industrial agricultural paradigm. Studies in developing nations have demonstrated that as technology modernizes women "lose access to productive land; they do not receive information on or access to new technologies; their opportunities to accumulate and invest capital are diminished; and development efforts are focused on commercial, not subsistence, commodities" (Garkovich & Bokemeier, 1988, p. 211). Women in the US have historically lacked access to land ownership and opportunities to accumulate wealth, a gender-based discrimination that was institutionalized well before agriculture transitioned large-scale, mechanized production. The development of modern technologies, beginning primarily with the invention of the tractor, demanded a greater flow of cash and/or credit. This served to further solidify existing inequities and perceptions of farming as a man's world (ibid) and strengthened the patriarchal base of agriculture that continues to impede the success of farming women around the country (Haney & Knowles, 1988).

In more recent literature, there is a call for farm policy to reintegrate the separation of spheres that occurred in the 20th century. Offut (2002) argues that an important purpose of agricultural policy is to maintain and improve the well-being of farm families. In a similar vein as the feminist movement's call for the economic valuation of household work, scholars call for agricultural policies and programs to consider farm household work an inextricable aspect of total farm productivity. Whether performed by women or men, in the household, in the field or even off-farm, all activities are contributing to the success of the farm enterprise and the production of marketable output.

Transitioning Back — Making Farm Women Visible:

The experience of the female producer today is different even from the late 20th century, and little research exists documenting the experiences of the 21st century farm woman. Much of the research documenting gender in the food system continues to perpetuate notions of the woman as consumer rather than producer, recipient rather than provider. Even the call to value rural women's household work as productive still maintains a gendered division of spheres. However, there is growing acknowledgment of the role women play as producers and even an increase in the number of female principle farm operators — up 12.62% from 1997-2002 (Lipson, 2004). According to the USDA, 11% of principal farm operators and 27% of total farm operators in 2002 were women. The 2002 Census of Agriculture allowed farms for the first time to identify second and third operators, making the productive roles of farm women more visible through better

counting methods. Prior to that, the Census had only allowed farms to identify a single, primary operator, which in farm families would typically be the husband and the contributions of farm women were dramatically underestimated.

Whether due to better counting methods or changing opportunities for rural women, the number of women farmers has steadily risen in recent decades. Today, women make up 14% of principal operators in the US (Looker, 2013). Undercounting still remains an issue, however, as the Census defines a farm based on average annual sales, currently defining a farm as "any operation with sales of at least $1,000 in the census year, or which would normally have had such sales" (USDA, 1998, p. 21). Factoring annual sales into the definition significantly affects recognition and representation of women farmers, since in 2011 the average on-farm income for female principal operators was -$3,345, as opposed to the average of $16,684 for male principal operators (USDA, 2011). According to National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) only 5% of commercial farms were operated by women in 2002 (Women's Agricultural Community, 2012).

However, some recent research has revealed that there is a greater percentage of women among organic farmers than farmers as a whole. A survey by the Organic Farming Research Foundation in California found that 22% of respondents are women (Lipson, 2004). Women have also been found to be more likely to use sustainable practices and forego chemical-intensive production methods. Due to the capital-intensive nature of conventional agriculture, it may very well be a response to circumstance and limited opportunity rather than any essentialist proclivities. There is an overall rejection of the notion that women are drawn to certain practices due to a natural feminine tendency towards nurturing and harmony with nature. Women are less likely to own land or access credit, making farming organically on a small scale a much more economically and socially accessible activity. Women are simply adapting to and struggling against their own marginalization by "buying smaller farms closer to urban areas so they can market their produce to an urban environment" (Lipson, 2004). With the average age of farmers in the United States consistently rising, the next generation of young farmers is likely to include even more women and, "the data suggests that many of these women will opt for organic farming, working to decrease our dependence on environmental toxins and on a food system that dominates nature rather than working in tandem with it" (ibid).

Conclusion:

Despite many gains, there remains a strong complaint among women in agriculture that they are still not seen as "The Farmer" (Lipson, 2004). Rural women's organizations such as Women in Farm Economics (WIFE) emphasize the significant contributions women made to farm households — via manual labor, poultry management, child rearing, gardening, etc. — while maintaining the conceptualization of "farmer" as distinctly male. Concern over deteriorating economic conditions and social moral fiber spurred their activism rather than any feminist notions of challenging rural gender norms (Devine, 2009). Illustrating this, a 2002 study by Brandth found that rural farm women have been reluctant to identify with feminism, viewing it as a distinctly

urban phenomenon that is hostile towards men and antithetical to traditional family dynamics. Conversely, urban perceptions of agrarian women view them as simply not modern or educated enough to recognize their oppression. They are labeled "traditional," and over time will begin the natural move towards calling for emancipation and equity (Brandth, 2002).

This dynamic between urban and rural women highlights a pervasive underlying misconception within the modern patriarchal system that women's experiences are universal and that a common women's identity exists. Feminism, even, has been criticized by post-structuralists as reinforcing a fixed, easily defined category of "woman" that exists cross-culturally. This poses a difficult reality for promoting understanding of and equity for female producers today. Industrialization and capitalization of agriculture rendered women's productive contributions to farm enterprises invisible. However, in making them visible again, it is important to recognize that within the category of "farm woman" there is a great amount of diversity in their experiences.

In addition, as research continues to explore and illuminate the experiences of women engaging in urban and peri-urban agricultural activities in the US and globally, it is important to acknowledge the extent to which these activities — due to their setting, scale, and the gender of the cultivators — are also labeled as gardening rather than farming. In this sense, there is great opportunity for recognizing commonality in the rural and urban farm woman experience. Women's contributions to food production, whether for personal and family consumption or for market, are labeled as a hobby rather than a profession. This seemingly slight difference in labels dramatically influences perceptions of the skill, training, and expertise involved, devaluing the knowledge and labor of women producers as frivolous and insignificant. The historical evolution that transitioned women from "farmers" to "gardeners" has been institutionalized in US farm policy, directing funding and assistance to men and effectively pushing women out of the picture of American food production.

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