



Testing the Women Landowner Conservation Learning Circle Model

Results from Illinois and Indiana

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Introduction

American Farmland Trust (AFT) is an organization whose mission is to “save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land.” In 2012, AFT expanded their initiative to focus on women in agriculture after recognizing the work of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) to initiate women’s conservation learning circles in Iowa through a program called “Women Caring for the Land” (Eells & Soulis, 2013).

The goal of learning circles is to educate, support, connect, and empower women landowners to overcome the gendered challenges they experience as landowners. With the support of a USDA¹ Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) in 2012, WFAN worked with AFT and several other agricultural organizations to expand and test the learning circle model across seven Midwestern states.

1. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is an agency that promotes agricultural production and the conservation of our nation’s natural resources (USDA, n.d.).



NRCS² has an outreach mandate to insure all potential participants are aware of their programs and services. A targeted goal of the agency is to reach women who own or operate land. Another important audience is nonoperating landowners, so the partnership with AFT and WFAN to host learning circles was a welcomed opportunity. Other important conservation partners, such as soil and water conservation districts, USDA Farm Service Agency, and USDA Cooperative Extension Service, have similar goals and serve similar customers. In Indiana, NRCS was instrumental

in establishing Women4theLand.³ This group is made up of representatives of the Indiana Conservation Partnership who work together to conduct women’s conservation learning circles.

All partners agree that the benefits of these learning circles are clearly transferable and have been expanding the use of the method since then. Learning circles are or have been held in 15 states since 2012. In this report, we detail the conservation learning circle methodology, research methods, findings, and conclusions.

2. NRCS is a USDA agency that provides financial and technical assistance for farmers and ranchers to implement conservation practices (Natural Resources Conservation Service, n.d.).

3. Women4theLand is a program initiated by the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) and sponsored by the Indiana Conservation Partnership that hosts women’s conservation learning circles to “better serve women landowners and operators to manage and improve their land” in Indiana (Women4theLand, n.d.).

The “Conservation Learning Circle” Methodology

Between 2014 and 2017, AFT and W4L facilitated 43 learning circles in Illinois (13 circles) and Indiana (31 circles). The meetings focused primarily on soil health, and sometimes incorporated more specific topics like conservative planning, leasing, forestry practices and pollinator habitat.

Once a local community decides to host a learning circle, we establish a local planning committee typically consisting of soil and water conservation districts, NRCS, cooperative extension service, state agricultural agencies, Farm Service Agency, and others, depending on the location and interest.

At a typical learning circle meeting, a group of 12–20 women landowners who own land in or near the area gather at a public meeting place. The meeting room is set up with tables in a circular or rectangular shape, so that women face each other and there is no obvious “head of the table.” A trained female facilitator leads the meeting and helps to direct the discussion, and female conservation professionals provide technical content. The facilitator and staff sit among the group, and during introductions the facilitator and staff introduce themselves personally as well as professionally. These peer learning techniques put everyone in equal standing, which encourages open discussion and questions. The emphasis is on respectful listening, equal time for expressing thoughts and concerns, and sharing wisdom among the members of the group (WFAN, 2018).

Each learning circle follows the same general format as outlined in the Women Caring for the

Land curriculum manual.⁴ They are daylong events, from 9 am to 3 pm, and are exclusive to women during the morning discussion.

Before any information or resources are mentioned, each individual (whether staffer, landowner, or both) is given about three minutes to introduce herself, explain a bit about her farm, and why she came to the learning circle. Individuals are encouraged to share any issues they are having trouble resolving and/or ultimate goals or dreams for their land. This lengthy introductory period is an integral part of the meeting and sets the tone for the day, establishing an equal, peer-to-peer framework and a relaxed, conversational feel to the meeting.

Staff are coached before the meeting to share a bit of their personal story as well—for example, if they are not from a farming background, what brought them into farming or conservation as a career? This activity establishes all participants as the experts and decision makers on their own land—a role they are not often accustomed to playing. The women typically open up as they feel more comfortable, sharing their values, personal stories, and relating to each other about how difficult the transition to ownership can be (often it involves the sudden death of a spouse or parent, or a long illness). The women will sometimes discuss barriers they have overcome related to gender: for example, farm advisors or farmers renting from them not taking them or their questions seriously. While the conversation does not linger on these complaints, it is important for the women to feel like they are in a space where it is safe to share these difficulties and possible solutions.

4. Available at www.wfan.org/our-programs/women-caring-for-the-landsm/curriculum-manual.



Following a short break, the meeting resumes with a conservation-related discussion. For soil health, the most common topic, the discussion focuses on what soil is and what it means to be healthy, with a focus on the importance of a diverse soil microbiome. The discussion is interactive, using visual aids (the soil itself), demonstrations, and props to teach the concepts. Complex technical information is presented, but great care is taken to use plain language, avoiding jargon and overly technical terms. The goal is not to try to explain EVERYTHING about soil in just one sitting, but to inspire curiosity to learn more. Learning outcomes for a soil health learning circle are to understand: 1) what soil is, 2) how soil can be described by its physical, chemical, and biological properties, 3) that soil is a living food web powered by the sun, and 4) that soil can be managed and improved for long-term productivity and environmental performance. After the technical discussion, lunch and a networking break occurs, lasting from 30–

60 minutes depending on how far travel is for the field tour. At the lunch break, male resource professionals who will join the field tour may be invited. While it is important for the morning session to be women-only, the women also need to know who their local resource people are, regardless of gender.

The field tour reinforces learning from the morning—enabling the women to see conservation practices on the ground that farmers are using to promote soil health. The tour begins with shared transportation, which is another key best practice. Travel occurs via a school bus or 15-passenger van, which encourages further networking. Participants will often take advantage of this time to query resource professionals individually about specific issues relevant to them.

The field tour begins with an informal presentation by the landowner and/or farmer whose land we are visiting or a resource professional that works one-on-one with that individual. An attempt is made to visit women-owned farms, the landowner and farmer are encouraged to talk about how they communicate and work together on conservation practices. Resource professionals are coached to present technical information about the practices the women are seeing in interactive ways and using plain language.

The day wraps up with a return to the meeting location. Attendees are asked to fill out evaluations, and the learning circle ends with a brief discussion asking the attendees for any “a-ha” moments they had during the day and any actions they intend to take when they go home. This further cements the learning from throughout the day.

Methods

The research method used for this evaluative study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women involved in agriculture in some way, most often as landowners and/or as farmers. All the women attended learning circles in either Illinois or Indiana. A list of women attendees from 2014 to 2017 was provided to Utah State University researchers with addresses, emails, and telephone contact information.⁵ In August of 2016, an email was sent to each woman attendee from the facilitator of the learning circles (Jennifer Filipiak, AFT's Midwest Director) and from Heather Bacher, the State Coordinator with Indiana's Women4theLand. Attendees were informed of the purpose of the study and provided notice that they would be contacted by a Ph.D. student (the first author of this report) at Utah State University via email or telephone in the upcoming weeks to schedule a telephone interview. The email gave women the opportunity to reply directly Filipiak or Bacher to schedule an interview. If they replied, the first author was informed, who then sent a follow-up email to schedule a phone interview.

For those women who did not respond to the initial email, the first author attempted to reach them two more times via email (for a maximum of three attempts). The second wave of emails was sent in October 2016, and the third wave in January 2017. If there were three failed attempts via email, but a telephone number was provided, the first author initiated contact through phone, with a maximum of three attempts made. The first wave of telephone calls was conducted from November 2016 through January 2017, the second wave February through March

of 2017, and the final wave March to April of 2017. During the second half of 2017, additional contacts who attended meetings in 2016 or early 2017 were added to the list. These women were contacted using the same methods described above between July and October of 2017. In all instances, voicemails were left if there was no answer. When the participant was reached, some women were willing to be interviewed immediately, while in other situations interviews were scheduled for an upcoming date and time. Prior to the interview, respondents were informed of the study's purpose and asked for their consent to be voice recorded. If they provided consent, the interview was recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate data collection. If they preferred not to be recorded, detailed notes were taken. Each woman was asked interview questions contained in the Appendix, although time restraints prevented some from answering all questions, and there were various questions some women preferred not to answer.

Throughout the process, if any emails were returned as undeliverable, and the attendee had not provided telephone information, the contact was noted as undeliverable and eliminated from the study list. In addition, any contact's number no longer in service was eliminated from the study list. A total of 466 women's names were provided. After cleaning the list of names where contact information was missing and/or undeliverable or out of service, there remained 225 potential contacts for interviews. The study resulted in 137 participants who agreed to be interviewed, for a 60 percent response rate.⁶ This number was then decreased by seven, as

5. Not every attendee provided information for each of these contact modes, but a majority provided email addresses and/or telephone numbers.

6. Of the refusals, 20 potential respondents stated they did not remember the meetings due to the length of time since they attended, and thus were unable to participate.



one participant owned land in Canada, two were interns who came to the meetings to assist a facilitator, one did not provide enough information due to not remembering the meeting, and three were meeting facilitators who worked in various roles (either as a forestry educator, supervisor, or extension educator). This resulted in a total of 130 participant interviews.

Using the interview transcripts, we coded data into dominant themes (Aronson, 1994). We reviewed the coding and discussed and resolved any discrepancies among the coding. When changes in coding were made, we reviewed previously coded material to ensure it was coded consistently (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

We first provide information on attendee demographics and farming operations. We then discuss the women's reflections on the learning circles with data on what they identified as the most useful aspects of the meeting, whether they took action after the meeting, and if so, what changes were made as a result of attending the learning circles. Next, we provide information on what the women perceive as barriers to their success. For those with renters, we asked if they would make any changes to the relationship, and if so, what changes they would like to happen. Lastly, we discuss what women would like to see for future learning circle meetings.

Findings

Demographics

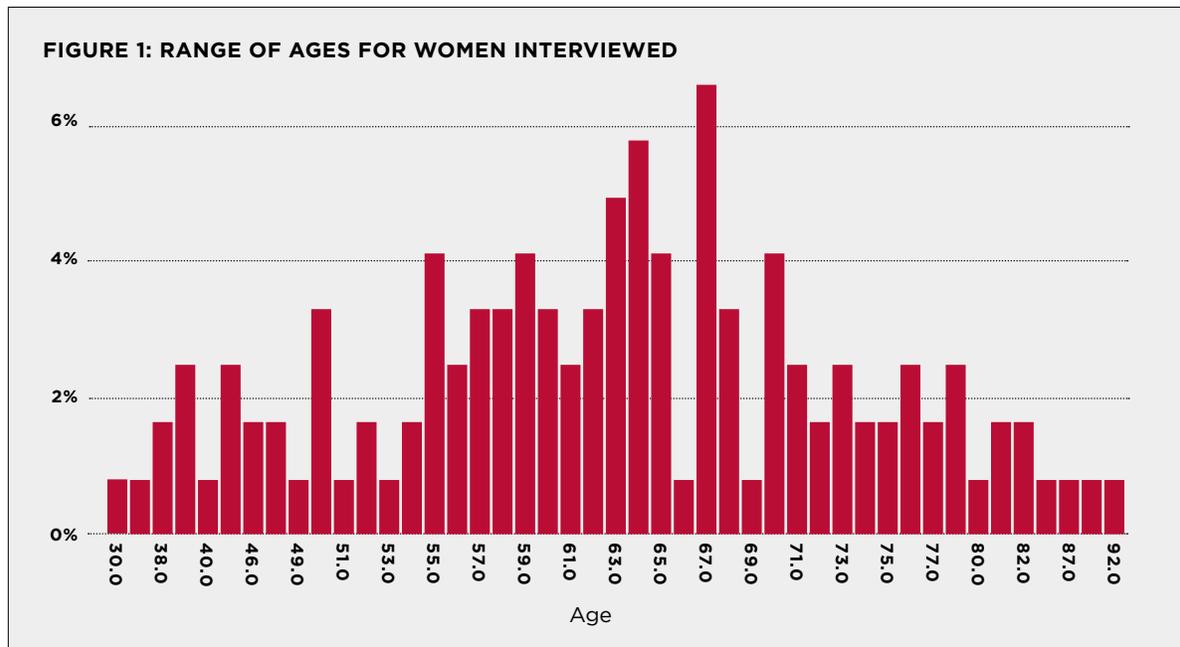
A large majority of the 130 women, 82 percent (n=107) stated they had attended one learning circle, with 18 percent (n=23) having attended more than one. Various demographic data was collected and is contained in Table 1. Out of 124 women who provided their age, the average age was 62, with ages ranging from 30 to 92 years (Figure 1). The women were asked if they were the sole owner of the farmland, or whether they co-owned the land with a spouse, family member, or another individual. A majority of the women responded they co-owned their land (55 percent), whereas 36 percent identified as the sole owner. Most of the remaining women identified as either an heir or trustee to the land.

A majority of the women (70 percent) identified that they lived on their land. Of the 30 percent

TABLE 1. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

	AVERAGE OR PERCENTAGE (N)
AGE (N=124)	62, Range 30-92
OWNERSHIP (N=126)	
Co-owner	55% (n=69)
Sole	36% (n=45)
RESIDENCE (N=121)	
On-land	70% (n=85)
Off-land	30% (n=36)
MILES FROM LAND (N=24)	46 miles Range 0.5-400 miles
IDENTIFY AS FARMER/RANCHER (N=121)	
Yes	60% (n=73)
No	38% (n=46)

who lived off the land, the average distance (in miles) they lived from their farmland was 46 miles. However, the range was 0.5 to 400 miles. Therefore, median⁷ and mode⁸ were calculated as 19 and 11 miles, respectively. Women were



7. The median being defined as the middle value that was observed once all values were organized in ascending order.

8. Mode is defined as the value that was identified most often.

also asked whether they self-identify as a farmer (or rancher), with a majority (60 percent) responding that they do.

Information on farming operation

To gain a better understanding of the women’s farming operations, they were asked about their crop rotation, whether they had a renter, and if so, information about the lease arrangement. As shown in Table 2, nearly half of the women answering this question (48 percent) use a strictly corn and soybean crop rotation. The next most popular rotation for 19 percent of the women was a variation of the corn and bean rotation schedule, which often included another crop added, such as hay or wheat. Those in the “other” category specified another use for their farmland that did not necessarily require crop rotation practices. Some women in this category described their land as being used for a tree farm, vegetable garden, pasture, or forestland.

For 59 percent of the women who responded, their farm operations are being operated by a renter. Thirty-one percent of the women farm the land themselves. Of those women who rent out their land, 51 percent use a cash rent lease arrangement. The second most common lease arrangement (32 percent) is crop sharing. The data also show that a majority of the women have a written lease agreement (57 percent), but there are still a relatively high number who only have a verbal agreement (43 percent). Lastly, of those who specified the length of their lease, the majority stated it was renewed annually (69 percent).

Most useful aspect of learning circle

The women were asked to explain the most useful information they gained from the learning circle meeting (Table 3). The top three responses

TABLE 2. FARM INFORMATION

	PERCENTAGES (N)
CROP ROTATION (N=124)	
Corn/bean	48% (n=60)
Variation of corn/bean	19% (n=24)
Other	11% (n=14)
FARM RENTER OR FARMER (N=124)	
Respondent has renter	59% (n=73)
Respondent is the farmer	31% (n=39)
Other	6% (n=7)
LEASE ARRANGEMENT FOR THOSE WITH RENTER (N=65)	
Cash rent	51% (n=33)
Crop share	32% (n=21)
Unsure	6% (n=4)
LEASE INFORMATION (N=21)	
Written	57% (n=12)
Verbal	43% (n=9)
LENGTH OF LEASE (N=13)	
Annual	69% (n=9)
2-year	8% (n=1)
3-year	23% (n=3)

include: (1) hands-on learning, which includes the field day along with soil health information and demonstrations; (2) meeting other women, hearing and learning from their experiences; and (3) cover crop information.⁹ The most common response, noted by 44 percent of women, was the hands-on learning. Some women specifically mentioned benefitting from the soil health information and visuals.

In the words of one 54-year-old woman, “*I really liked the soil... when we were at [farm location]... I really liked the information on the different types of soil. All of those experiment types of things they did were really informative for me... 'cause I'm a visual person. So for me, it was really neat to actually see the different layers of the soil and that gave me a great understanding about no-till, so I was like yay! That's good!*”

9. The counts provided include any woman who indicated these aspects as their #1 or #2 pick.

Other women discussed the demonstrations during the field trip. One 56-year-old woman said, *“It was very helpful to go out to the [name]’s farm... and seeing some of what they were talking about in practice, and [farmer’s name] was very nice and mentioned, particularly to me, if I had any questions once we got land, she would be happy to help with that. So it was nice to see it in practice and you know, it’s always more fun to get your fingers in the dirt than just read about it.”*

The second most common response, noted by 38 percent of women, was meeting other women, hearing and learning from their experiences. These women specifically discussed the importance of hearing and learning from other women, and not simply general networking opportunities. They commonly expressed that it was helpful to see other women in situations similar to their own and enjoyed the opportunity to make lasting connections with other women. In the words of one 75-year-old participant, *“it was really nice for me to see there were other women kind of in the same situation that I was. And many of them had much more experience with the farming issues than I did, and so it was... I appreciated being able to hear what they had to say, and some of the issues that were of concern for them. So I really liked that a lot.”*

The third most useful aspect of the meetings, as identified by 24 percent of the women, was

TABLE 3. TOP THREE MOST USEFUL ASPECTS OF THE LEARNING CIRCLE (N=130)

	PERCENTAGES (N)
Hands-on learning (field trip and soil health information and visual)	44% (n=57)
Meeting other women, hearing and learning from their experiences	38% (n=49)
Cover crop information	24% (n=31)

information on cover crops. As one 46-year-old woman stated, *“It was all very interesting because it was so new to me, I’d never been to one [learning circle] before, but especially the erosion and cover-crop portion of it. I got a lot of information because we had just started with our cover crop, and so it made me understand more what [spouse’s name] already understood and the importance of it and all of the root systems, and how things work, and how the cover crop promoted the soil to stay intact and healthy and all that good stuff.”*

Actions taken/changes made as result of attending learning circle

We were also interested in knowing what changes were made as a result of attending the learning circle. Out of all of the women interviewed, 72 percent stated they made changes to their farmland with 28 percent of the women noting no action was taken (Table 4).

TABLE 4. MADE CHANGES AS A RESULT OF ATTENDING LEARNING CIRCLE (N=130)

	PERCENTAGES (N)
Yes	72% (n=94)
No	28% (n=36)

For the 72 percent of women who said they made changes, we asked what action was taken as a result of attending the learning circle meetings. Table 5 shows a summary of the top five changes made by these women.¹⁰ The data shows that 47 percent of the women who made changes said they talked to a family member regarding conservation or about what they learned at the meeting. One 60-year-old woman stated, *“We talked about the soil and the different levels of soil and the nitrate and how to be able to just, you know, show the roots of stuff,*

10. The counts provided include any woman who indicated these changes as their #1 or #2 pick.

TABLE 5. TOP FIVE CHANGES MADE AS A RESULT OF ATTENDING LEARNING CIRCLES (N=130)

ACTION TAKEN	NUMBER OF WOMEN WHO TOOK THIS ACTION	OF THE WOMEN WHO TOOK AN ACTION (N=94), PERCENTAGE WHO TOOK THIS ACTION	OF ALL WOMEN INTERVIEWED (N=130), PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN WHO TOOK THIS ACTION
Talked to family member regarding conservation or what was learned at meeting	44	44/94=47%	44/130=34%
Implemented conservation practices on the land	30	32%	23%
Spoke with renter specifically about conservation	22	23%	17%
Reached out to staff or organization	19	20%	15%
Spoke with renter about the meeting	12	13%	9%
No action taken	36	N/A	28%

especially on cover crops, and how to, even I went out to my farm, and I was showing my husband, I could hold something up, and I could show him the roots and how they're shooting straight down... And... my boys were only like 15 at the time, 16, they thought it was very cool too."

The second most common change was the implementation of conservation practices, identified by 32 percent of the women. In many cases, this involved changes in soil management, including the use of cover crops. For one woman (age 58), she explained how conversations with her renter led to actual implementation of cover crops: *"The new tenant was pretty much on board to that type of thinking about conservation farming... so it was easy to work with him to start implementing some of these ideas, and he has been very open about different types of cover crops to put on during the winter time."*

The use of other conservation practices was also identified, including one 58-year-old woman who stated, *"We had some problems with some erosion and we've got pretty much... it somewhat under control, and we're trying to make sure they don't plow it, or well you know plow in a way that does anything that would cultivate it so that it goes back into erosion again."*

Twenty-three percent of the women who made a change stated that they talked with their renter specifically about conservation.

One 58-year-old woman who owns the land with her father stated, *"I would say that my talking [with my farmer] about the cover crop, it took a while, but I do think it was inspired by that meeting. I mean I had started to learn about that but it [the meeting] really helped me, you know, feel more confident about talking to him."* Another 65-year-old woman who is the sole owner of her land said, *"I absolutely had conversations with the farmer. We have several goals. One would be rotational grazing, and the purpose of that is to have a more natural fertilizer on the land."*

The fourth most common response was reaching out to natural resource agency staff members or organizations for information or assistance (20 percent). One woman (age 63) stated, *"What it inspired me to do was get in touch with NRCS in [redacted] County, and USDA in [redacted] County, and start looking at different options I had. They kind of opened my eyes. The meeting opened my eyes to different funding things that were out there... I got in touch with a forester, and... I got in touch*



with... I think the DNR¹¹ ... and all of those people gave us lots and lots of information. So mostly what I got from the meeting was that I got a contact person that opened everything up. Before that it was very, very confusing. And the [facilitator] was like well you talk to this person, she will get your stuff all organized, and she really did, so that was really, really helpful.”

For another 49-year-old participant, the learning circle meetings provided her contact with natural resource agency staff members who were able to visit her farm and discuss practices with her renter. She explains, “I went to the class, talked to [staff member], [staff member] came out, told me all the different programs. Talked to [renter], [renter] sat down with [them], talked about, registered for ... they’re

[renter] paying for the cover crops versus me paying for the cover crops. They’re paying for cover crops, and they’re gonna pay for some other improvements on the land to make it more, even more ecologically friendly.”

The fifth most common action (13 percent) were women who said they spoke with their farmer about the meetings, but not mentioning specifically conservation-related topics. For these responses, many of the women provided little detail on the content of their conversations. For example, one 62-year-old woman simply stated, “I kind of shared what I learned in the meetings and we chatted about it, and basically just shared information about it.” She later mentioned that she doubted her farmer did anything with the information, but

11. Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is a state-based agency whose mission is to protect and enhance the natural resources of each state for the benefit of its residents (Indiana Department of Natural Resources, 2018).



It is also important to note that even though 28 percent of the women indicated they have not made any changes, some indicated this was due to their selling of the land, not enough time, and 24 out of the 36 women stated it was because they are currently content with their farming operations. That may mean they were already using the practices described in the meeting. One 38-year-old woman who said no action was taken clarified by saying, *“My philosophy is very much... more conservation... trying to be a good steward of the land, and I think that’s our whole family outlook... I guess trying to do whatever we can do, or we just kind of keep doing as we’re doing. But we like the steps we have taken.”*

Barriers to success

We wanted to know, what are the biggest barriers these women experience in the agricultural world? Table 6 contains the three most common responses.¹² Out of the 127 women who responded to this question, 83 percent of women had at least one barrier they discussed, while 17 percent said there were no barriers. What was most commonly identified (33 percent) were gender barriers. For example, one woman (age 65) stated, *“It’s a very antiquated attitude... it’s just, it’s a perception that it’s [agriculture] made up of a lot of little boys, and it’s really tough to penetrate that sometimes. You know, I have a job where I work with predominately male board members. And I’m kind of used to that type of conversation. And I think that’s helped me in some respects. But I think, you know, maybe that could be a workshop at some point, how to diffuse the, you know, I had the perfect saying and now I can’t remember it, but how to diffuse the old-fashioned attitudes.”*



she did take that step to have the conversation with her farmer. Other women acknowledged the meetings helped inspire them to talk to their farmer, but provided no detail of the specific topics that were discussed.

The second most common barrier (25 percent) was women’s perceived lack of knowledge of farming practices. One 62-year-old woman discussed her own experience: *“I think that to*

12. The counts provided include any woman who indicated these barriers as their #1 or #2 pick.

TABLE 6. TOP 3 BARRIERS FOR WOMEN'S SUCCESS IN THE AGRICULTURAL WORLD (N=127)

	PERCENTAGES (N)
Gender barriers	33% (n=42)
Lack of knowledge	25% (n=32)
Financial issues	8% (n=10)
No Barriers	17% (n=22)

have all of the, you know, as much information and tools in your toolbox, it's better, and you know it's going to help women, so typically it's always been guys that have done the farming, but not always, and then if you didn't... you don't have someone to help you learn it, you know I mean I feel like, I go oh I know a lot about the farm, and then my dad dies and then I'm like shit, I don't know all of the stuff I don't know."

The third most commonly identified barrier was financial issues that hinder the women from starting their own farming operation, or the need for dual incomes to support a small farm. One woman (age 64) discussed the advantage that comes from growing up on a family farm by saying, *"I think the biggest barrier for the women is the money, but I don't think that's just a woman. I think that's men and women, anybody that wants to get into farming today. It just costs a lot of money unless you're walking in on a family farm, you can't do it because of the cost of equipment, the cost of everything. And the bank's not going to give you loans."*

Financial issues were identified as prohibitive to anyone pursuing involvement in agricultural landownership, especially for those on small farms. Another 59-year-old woman stated, *"I think mostly, I mean not just for women, but in general I mean, like we have to have dual incomes, or you can't, you know, on a small scale... you can't make a living off of small scale, on the small farm. You can make some extra money selling your eggs or your vegetables, or you know have a vegetable stand or something and a market, but I used to be married to a farmer*

in [County], and would raise Angus cattle, and about 20 acres of soybeans or hay, and I mean we both had to have full time jobs, so I mean, that's just, you know, that's just the way it is."

Desired changes to renter relationship

Knowing that a majority of our respondents have a farm renter, we wanted to dig deeper to determine whether or not these women would change anything about the relationship they have with their renter. We already know some face barriers with their renter. Indeed, several of the women who indicated they took no action as a result of the learning circles stated it was due to wanting to preserve their renter relationship. As one woman (age 71) told us, the lack of action was to maintain the renter relationship: *"We are just done wanting to be demanding, we just, we want to keep the same relationship, but more of the idea that when he does retire, perhaps we'll be a little bit more aggressive... and like so many of us, you really don't want to be demanding, but you do want to be a good manager, a good steward of what we've got."*

Of those women who responded, 65 percent stated that they would not change anything about their current renter relationship (Table 7). Of the 15 percent of women who described communication issues, many described their desire to have more frequent communication with their renter. In some cases, it was the woman's own busy schedule preventing communication, as was the case for this 74-year-old landowner who said, *"We have wonderful farmers, I think they really know what they're doing, they keep up with technology, and I wish I had more time to talk to them. Not that I have anything in particular because they're always available if I do need to talk to them specifically, but you know, sometimes things are exposed in just table talk conversation, you know, that you didn't necessarily have a goal but you just sit down and talk and things come up and, oh I didn't realize that. So that's the only*

thing, but that's not really a complaint. That's just something I wish I could get more of, you know... it's kind of wishful thinking type of thing in an ideal world."

In other situations, the landowner expressed how their farmer was poor at communicating. For one 51-year-old woman, she laughed when discussing potential changes because of how hopeless it seemed, saying, *"Well he's an excellent farmer and poor communicator. And we're kind of used to that and we get out of him what we need. So I don't think there maybe is a good combination of good farmer, good communicator, I think there are a lot of out there, so we're happy with the farmer just because he is a good guy, good farmer."* For another woman (age 63), this lack of communication stems from their farmer's "old-school" mentality. As she stated, *"I think he does a reasonable job. If it were me, I would be a little bit more in contact with him, but it's largely my husband's deal to talk to this gentleman because sometimes it's better if a guy talks to a guy. And I think he's kind of, I think the farmer is kind of one of those old-school people, you know, as we say, 'women belong in the kitchen' type."*

For the 14 percent of women stating their renter was not open to or interested in sustainable practices, reasons ranged from their renter having a different philosophy on farming to their farmer failing to implement as many conservation practices as the landowner would like to see. In one example, a 59-year-old landowner stated, *"As far as like getting him to change the way he farms, you know, like he told me when we settled that last fall, he's been farming this way for 45 years, and he's really not subject to changing. So the idea of going into doing cover crops and the challenges that it may hold, with his age and his experience, he's just not really willing to try to do cover crops at this point."*

TABLE 7. RENTER RELATIONSHIP (N=72)¹³

TOP 3 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
No changes needed	65% (n=47)
Increase in communication	15% (n=11)
Not open to/interested in sustainable practices	14% (n=10)

Future meetings

The women were also asked what other types of learning circle activities could be offered to help them as women in agriculture (Table 8). About a quarter of the women emphasized their desire to have more activities that would provide them with information on financial and technical assistance (24 percent). Most women did not specify a topic of financial and technical assistance, but for those who did, most addressed the need for information on estate planning, legal information (ex: taxes), rental agreements, and more. For example, one woman (age 65) stressed estate planning by saying, *"I think I learned a lot by having to go through an estate process, and actually get hit with the issues that arise... I think for other women it's going to be really important to know the nuts and bolts of how do you write a buy-sell agreement with a hard number in there for discount? How do you deal with lawyers?... and so women need to be educated about the, what the actual situation is. You need really hard financial information."*

The second most common response, by 20 percent of women, was the activities that are currently being offered. When asked, many of these women would respond with a straight forward response, such as, *"All of [them],"* said one (age 78), while another (age 58) indicated, *"I can't think of anything that I missed, or didn't just wish you could do more of them I guess"* (a point we will return to).

13. The counts provided include any woman who indicated the latter two responses as their #1 or #2 pick.



TABLE 8. ACTIVITIES FOR FUTURE MEETINGS (N=127)

TOP 3 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
Financial/technical assistance	24% (n=31)
Continue activities currently being offered	20% (n=26)
Field days	17% (n=22)

The third most common response, from 17 percent of the women, was the hope that field days will continue to be offered in future meetings. In the words of one 38-year-old attendee, *“I think field days are always super helpful. I think women especially love to go out to other people’s places and kind of see different ways that people are doing things. And just, I think that hands-on, visual learning is really important as a woman. And just being like, ‘Oh wow, look at... this is something that I could do. This is approachable.’”*

Recommendations for Improvements

Finally, the women provided thoughts on the improvement of future meetings. Over half of all respondents (54 percent, n=69), stated that they had no suggestions for how the meetings can be improved. For those 46 percent (n=59) who *did* have thoughts on improvements, they most commonly identified meeting structure, additional information on all things agriculture, and the desire to have more follow up after meetings (Table 9).

TABLE 9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS (N=128)

TOP 3 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES OF THOSE WHO HAVE RECOMMENDATIONS (N)
Meeting structure	31% (n=18)
Additional information on all things agriculture	25% (n=15)
More follow up after meetings/ more meetings	10% (n=6)
No recommendations given	54% (n=69)



Of the 31 percent of women who brought up meeting structure, the most common criticisms were topics not relevant to their specific situation; need to keep certain attendees from dominating the conversation; and to have a stronger emphasis on networking. In order to make topics more relevant to participants, one 63-year-old woman suggested breaking up the meetings by topic to address more needs, by saying, *“I think one of the things that might be helpful, because the women have some, you know... there was a diversity of needs that they had and that there might have been women that could have been invited to a couple of groups, so if you needed more information on being a landlord, go to one track, or if you really wanted to know about like, my interest wasn’t biodiversity or sustainability or moving to organics... that could be another track.”*

A 59-year-old participant explained how the topics were not relevant to her situation by saying, *“No, it is kind of a repeat, now last year there was a lady come in and talking about organic gardening, and I garden, and I’ve gardened for years, and I do organic things and stuff, but I’m personally not an advocate for that either. You know, so it was like, okay, we can just shut this off because I’m not really interested in what she’s saying.”*

One 30-year-old woman described her frustration with certain participants dominating the conversation by saying, *“At the beginning, they let every woman there kind of introduce themselves and talk a little bit about why they came, you know, all that. And I would say that drag on forever. So that would be the only thing that I would change is just*

kind of give people some direction because, I mean, you give most women a room and they'll talk for like, I mean they can talk. So I would think that would be the only thing that I would have done different in the meeting... Women don't give short synopsis. So maybe have a little bit more guidance so that there's more information given."

Of those who discussed the latter, one woman (age 44), mentioned how she enjoyed networking, but would like more opportunity to do so in future meetings. She said, *"It was interesting to network and talk to some of the other participants, and learn what kind of activities and things that they're doing. (A little later...) And even though there was a bit of time for networking, it was mostly on the way to the tours and that kind of thing... but there wasn't a lot of other down time that we could do a lot of chatting. I remember we did just a quick sharing at the beginning of why we're there and what our interests were, and then I think we had several speakers and then we went out to the farmers. So even though that's all important, it's also, I think, the time to do a little more networking and just learn from each other is important."*

The second most common recommendation, by 25 percent of the women, is that the meetings provide additional information on all things related to agriculture. This includes information on government and organization programs that may benefit them as a woman involved in agriculture in some way, information on other conservation techniques and practices (or more in-depth discussions of practices already discussed in prior meetings), along with information that might benefit different types of women in agriculture, such as those on smaller farms or those with livestock.

Related to information on programs, one 46-year-old woman said, *"I thought the program this year was a little bit less beneficial. I know that the idea was whole farm conservation planning, and there was I think kind of a single lecture about nine steps to that, but I think what would have been more valuable, or what would have been valuable in addition to that, is really talking about the individual programs... the criteria of the programs that might be available, in terms of pollinators, grassy strips, hoop houses. They gave us some references to go to that, but they gave us some down time and I don't know, you know, there was maybe an extra hour in there it seems like that maybe could have been used to discuss the process in a little more detail and the possible programs. Conservation programs."* The third most common response represents 10 percent of the women, and were those who recommended holding meetings more frequently, or at least having more follow-up from previous meetings.

A 39-year-old woman suggested, *"I think women want to get involved, so I think maybe somehow being able to do more, offer more education like following up with the group kind of thing. Either through a follow-up class, or I don't know exactly what that would look like. I think it's the beginning of something, but it's like if you don't want it to end, where can you go from there? You can keep the momentum that you gained."* Another woman (age 67) stated, *"I suppose that the thing that really would be of real value... is if there were a way to reconnect, you know, in a group format with the people that did attend that day, and have a round table discussion about what they've learned."* Another important point to the follow up is, while none of the women were asked about desire for future meetings, a majority of the women (70 women, 54 percent) interviewed asked, unsolicited, when the next meeting was going to be held, as they wanted to attend.

Conclusion

The interview data provides both an in-depth evaluation of the learning circle meetings and an increased understanding of the needs of women attendees. Of the 130 women interviewed, 72 percent took some form of action, either through communicating what they learned to a family member or their renter, through the actual implementation of a new conservation practice, or by reaching out to natural resource agency staff or organizations. It is critical to note this is action taken after one meeting—illustrating the power behind the learning circle approach.

The evaluation shows the learning circle meetings are making a difference for women in agriculture. In order to improve their experiences and increase knowledge, the women had a few suggestions. Many women brought up the desire for more discussions related to

financial or technical assistance. Additionally, even though most women were content with the existing structure (especially the field days), many expressed hope for more follow up after meetings. This could be through less formal meetings with local women or through additional follow up from staff. This suggests that many women are hungry for connections and knowledge that can be gained from these meetings. The data here clearly shows women are still expressing barriers to their role in agriculture that stem from gender and a lack of knowledge. Women's learning circles are providing women with essential tools to help combat the barriers they experience. Taking these recommendations for improvement and learning from the experiences of these women can better enable educators to address these needs.





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Appendix: Complete list of interview questions for participants

1. Demographic Questions:
 - a. Age?
 - b. Sole or co-owner (with whom?)
 - c. Do you live on or off your land? (If off, how many miles away?)
 - d. Do you consider yourself to be a farmer or rancher? (Usually included with #4)
2. You attended a conservation learning circle in <city, state>. Was that the only one you attended, or have you been to more than one?
3. Thinking back on that day (or those days), was there anything you remember as being particularly useful or interesting from the meeting(s)?
4. Are there things you would recommend doing differently or other information you were hoping to get from the session that you did not get?
5. Tell me about your farm...
 - a. What type of crop rotation do you have?
 - b. Are you the farmer, or do you have a renter?
 - i. If you have a renter, what type of lease do you have (crop share, flexible, or cash rent)?
 - ii. If you could change one thing about your relationship with your renter, what would it be?
6. Have you made any follow up contacts as a result of the meeting, either with the staff who were there or with other participants?
7. Were you inspired to take any action after that meeting such as:
 - a. Visiting with your farmer, business partners, or family members about what you learned? (For each action they indicated they did: How did that go (i.e. hit any roadblocks, worked well, etc.))
8. Have you made any changes regarding management of your farmland that were inspired by that meeting? Such as:
 - a. Visiting your land more frequently
 - b. Making visits to your farm with family members, partners, or any of the conservation staff you met at the learning circle?
 - c. Asking your farmer to take or try a new practice?
 - d. Enroll in any assistance programs to try a new practice?
 - e. Implement any new conservation practice or management, like cover crops, filter strips, or reduced tillage?
 - f. Other? Please explain _____
9. What other types of activities we can offer to help you?
 - a. More learning circles,
 - b. Field days,
 - c. Different topics,
 - d. Financial or technical assistance?
 - e. Other? Please explain _____
10. What do you see as the biggest barrier for women to be successful as farmland owners?

Resources

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