

WOMEN IN CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE




American Farmland Trust
SAVING THE LAND THAT SUSTAINS US

37%

OF PRODUCERS IN CA

In 2017, there were at least 47,907 female producers in California, representing 37% of California's total producers [1], according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture. Fewer women were at the helm of agricultural operations, with just 32.5% indicated as primary producers [1].

GROWING SHARE

OF HIRED LABOR

In 2017 there were at least 377,593 hired workers on California farms [2], with the highest share of undocumented workers in the country among them [3]. Women represent an increasing proportion of this workforce in California [4,5].

75%

OF UC DAVIS AGRICULTURE UNDERGRADUATES

In 2019-2020, 75% of the students who earned a bachelor's degree in agriculture-related majors from UC Davis were women [6]. Compared to women making up 61% of the general undergraduate population at UC Davis [7], women are clearly outpacing men in agriculture education, in line with national trends since 2009 [8].

WOMEN IN U.S. AGRICULTURE



ASSETS WOMEN BRING

Women in agriculture bring richly diverse perspectives and skills to the field, and a growing body of research indicates particular strengths that women entrepreneurs and land stewards bring to their roles in agriculture.

An analysis of 2017 Census of Agriculture data showed that, across the U.S., compared to men primary producers, women primary producers represent greater racial and ethnic diversity [9]. Women stand out as drivers of local economies, since women tend to be more successful in running smaller, more diversified operations that sell directly to consumers [8]. Farms and ranches like these keep dollars circulating in local economies and tend to support regional job growth [10]. Women-led business laid off fewer workers during the 2008 financial crisis [8, 11].



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DISPARITIES AMONG WOMEN

Smaller Farm Size

Women are more likely to have small and medium-sized farms with lower farm sales [12]. Among female owner-operators, average farm size is about half that of their male counterparts [12].

Greater Portion are Beginning Farmers

Women represent an outsized share of the beginning farmer population, with more than 60% of respondents to the National Young Farmers Coalition 2017 survey being women [13].

Land Access Challenges

Female farmers' challenges acquiring farmland are well-documented in the literature [8, 12, 13]. Exclusion from networks, difficulty accessing credit, and the tendency for the retiring generation to choose male heirs are among the challenges [8].

Lower Farm Income

2020 peer-reviewed research that used 2012 Census of Ag data showed stark income disparities, describing "farming [a]s one of the most unequal professions in the United States today" [14]. Women-run farms, on average, operate on smaller acreage and earn forty percent less farm income than farms operated by men, after controlling for farm and operator characteristics [8, 14]. In 2014, for example, 91% of women farmers reported less than 50,000 USD in sales in contrast to 75% of all farms [15]. In an increasingly competitive marketplace that favors economies of scale, this means women farmers tend to have tighter economic margins.





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DISPARITIES AMONG WOMEN

Managing Off-farm Work

Even among women who are the primary producers of their operation, more than half across the U.S. had an off-farm job as their primary occupation in 2017 [1, 15].

Health Insurance Access Challenges

Beyond being a source of extra income, off-farm jobs are often a lifeline to maintain healthcare benefits [15, 16]. The costs of health insurance and childcare pull farm parents, particularly women, in opposing directions in terms of their attention and time put towards the farm operation [15, 16].

Childcare Challenges

Although farm parents recognize off-farm childcare as a financial investment that would improve productivity, agriculture's low returns often make this choice unattractive [15, 16]. As a result, many women focus on office-based roles on their farm so they can provide childcare simultaneously, leaving them less opportunity to take on more leadership over land management decisions [15, 16].

Hazards in the Field

Women are a growing share of the hired labor workforce [5] and they face hardships on job, including violence [17]. In 2017, 398,906 of the 2.4 million hired workers on U.S. farms were migrant workers, many of whom are undocumented [3]. Among hired laborers, most women are of childbearing age (in 2001–2002, the average age was 33 and half were younger than 31) [18]. Pregnant farmworkers and their fetuses are at increased risk of negative health outcomes due to exposure to chemical and physical hazards on the job [18].



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BARRIERS WOMEN EXPERIENCE

Internal & Interpersonal



Women tend to be more risk averse than men in the social context of the United States [8]. Research is still unclear, however, on how widely this applies to the variety of entrepreneurial decisions women in agriculture may make (for example buying insurance vs. applying for a loan.) It also remains unclear the extent to which stereotypes and implicit biases held by lenders and other service providers may also be contributing to this dynamic. In addition to risk aversion, for example, lenders may implicitly or explicitly see women as riskier borrowers, thus contributing to the disparities in women's access to credit. [19].



Research on negotiation suggests that women are 1) less inclined to initiate a negotiation than men 2) have less confidence to ask for more of what they want; and 3) face a backlash from attempting to negotiate, which is perceived as inconsistent with social norms [20]. When women do have good alternatives while negotiating, research shows they behave more assertively, but the backlash effect on top of that still means that women reach an impasse more often than men [21].

External & Structural



Implicit bias and discrimination among lenders and agricultural resource providers remain a barrier for women of color, in particular. Female farmers and farmers of color have reported experiencing discrimination when attempting to obtain agricultural credit & conservation support, including in lawsuits against USDA [22]. Exclusion from networks and a lack of connectivity with other women in agriculture also contribute to disparities in access to grants, land to lease or own, customer markets, and other critical resources.



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IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSERVATION

There is a continued need for equal access to resources to realize the potential of women as allies in conservation, climate-smart agriculture, and farmland protection.

Nationally between 2015-2020, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) awarded just 16 percent of conservation practice incentive contracts to women, while only 2 percent went to non-white women [23]. Considering that 36 percent of the nation's producers were women at the time of the 2017 US Census [24], women (and particularly women of color) remain underrepresented as beneficiaries of USDA's most critical conservation and climate-smart financial resources.

Women tend to live longer than men, resulting in a significant increase of farmland being transferred to female surviving spouses, many of whom have not been provided the same education about agricultural practices and resources that can support their farm's success [25].

Women in the United States continue to be underserved by agricultural education providers due to gender stereotypes, notions about what constitutes an "authentic" farmer, assertions of gender neutrality in programming, and incorrect assumptions regarding what types of education are useful to women farmers [26].



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INTERSECTIONS WITH AG LENDING

Women and farmers of color are underrepresented in agricultural lending, which exacerbates challenges with eligibility and accessibility of conservation programs.

Female farmers and farmers of color have reported experiencing discrimination in obtaining agricultural credit [22].

Women and farmers of color are more likely to operate smaller, lower-revenue farms, have weaker credit histories, and/or lack clear title to their agricultural land, which can make it difficult for them to qualify for loans [24].

Private lenders and federal agencies conduct outreach to counteract these trends, but the effectiveness of these efforts in increasing lending among marginalized groups is unknown [27].




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BENEFITS OF PEER TO PEER LEARNING

Providing targeted support for women is a proven and powerful tool for farmland protection and conservation practice adoption.

American Farmland Trust's research into women landowners, for example, has shown that gender dynamics and lack of knowledge and connections to service providers were among the top barriers women landowners face. Evaluation of our women-centered program has shown that conservation learning circles are one effective method for helping women farmers and landowners navigate such barriers. Peer-reviewed research into our Learning Circles with non-operating landowners found that 73 percent of participants took action toward conservation following a Learning Circle [28].

Evaluation of our 2020 programming found that 93 percent of women participants (who included non-operating landowners as well as farm operators and aspiring farmers) indicated that they were "very likely" or "extremely likely" to take an action such as sign up for a USDA Conservation Program or contact a service provider met at the Learning Circle following the program.

Research in adult education shows both men and women are most likely to take action when they feel comfortable asking questions and sharing information with one another, as opposed to traditional classroom presentation style methods of information delivery [28]. Learning via hands-on experiences and the opportunity to meet and learn from peers' experiences have been found to be the most valuable aspects of the Learning Circle model [28].





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