

The Farm to the Board Room: An Autoethnography Approach and Interviews with Women in Agriculture

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Introduction

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), there are about 51% of U.S. farming operations with at least one-woman operator accounted for in 2019 (U.S. Women, 2024). In 1978, the Census of Agriculture collected the first data on the genders of farmers (Hoppe & Korb, 2013). In the most recent census, 36% of U.S. producers are women (Farm Producers, 2024). Women have continued to increase a forward-facing dominance in the agricultural industry by pursuing leadership roles, entrepreneurship opportunities, and higher education (Leslie et al., 2019). Women are advocating for themselves within the industry with professional support groups such as American Agri-Women, Annie's Projects, American National CattleWomen, and Women for Agriculture (Prominent Groups, 2020).

In agriculture, women can bring new perspectives and skills to the industry. Women are the backbone of the industry but oftentimes not at the forefront (Leslie et al., 2019). Despite the several benefits, women in agriculture face many challenges such as small farm size, land access issues, lower farm income, and childcare struggles (Quisumbing et al., 2014). In the agriculture education discipline, women have been under-represented at secondary and postsecondary education levels (Cline et al., 2019). In 2017, faculty membership for women in the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) was 21.9% (Cline et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore the ways the researcher sees her identity of being a woman in agriculture alongside three qualitative interviews with academia women in agriculture. The following questions guided this study: (RQ1) How do women in academia describe their support in agriculture? (RQ2) What skills have I developed to support women in agriculture?

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Critical theory guided this study to help understand how individuals view themselves in the world where social and historical forces influence one experiences and identities (Kincheloe et al., 2018). This study evaluates the lived experiences of the researcher and the interview participants. Critical research is used to create empowerment and social justice especially where power dynamics and predominate social beliefs are present (Cline et al., 2019; Kincheloe et al., 2018).

Methodology

In this study, there are two forms of data collection with the researcher's autoethnography and three interviews. A branch of qualitative research, autoethnography combines characteristics of *autobiography* and *ethnography* (Ellis et al., 2011). The art of storytelling with detailed descriptions is used to create a dynamic story to add value to create personal or social change (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography tries to bridge the gap between science and art by contributing to the literature through conducted research in a narrative style (Ellis et al., 2011).

The researcher collected personal data of her identity as a young woman in agriculture. The reflection activities included journaling about how she views her identity in agriculture and answering the interview questionnaire same as the interview questions for the participants. In addition to her personal data collection, there were three interviews conducted with the same

identity as a woman in agriculture. All participants are faculty members at [Blank] State University in the College of Agriculture. During each interview, participants were able to provide as much detail each felt comfortable with about their identity. There were 14 set questions conducted in a semi-structured format.

Results/Findings

RQ1: The themes of *developing a community* and *creating a connection* shows how participants discussed their ways to feel supported with their identity. Participant A said, “My professional relationships have led to more personal relationships.” Participant B said, “I have a great network of other women so I feel supported as a woman in agriculture.” Participant C said, “I am surrounded by people who have my same passion for agriculture so I feel very supportive.” Although participants provided positive comments about their support with their identity, there are several barriers and challenges specifically with feeling compared to a male counterpart and motherhood. In the theme of *systemic challenges*, participant A said, “There is a constant struggle of the area of motherhood and being a professional.” Similarly, participant C said, “There is very little support for women who are working moms.” Participant B said, “I feel like I have to fight for things and prove myself more than my male colleagues.”

RQ2: Through the autoethnographic reflection activities, the researcher feels engagement and outreach are essential to bring awareness to the hard work and effort of women in agriculture. She feels privileged to have a strong support group encouraging her identity as a young woman navigating her future career. After conducting the interviews, the researcher felt shocked about the lack of support at the university level. She wants to share her experience, especially to women in the academia setting to create a stronger sense of community and network. The researcher can use her background in agriculture communications to connect women to organizations with the same mission and values to increase the level of support in agriculture.

Conclusion

Women in agriculture need to feel supported through an increase in resources, advocate for policies to promote gender equality, increase access to work opportunities, and better recognition for the work women are doing in their professions. The researcher can play the role of bridging the gap between current and future generations of women in agriculture to create a wider network for all voices to be heard and understood. Empowered women will continue to encourage other women to pursue leadership roles in the academic world and the agriculture industry. A strong network and support group create invaluable opportunities for women in agriculture.

Implications/Recommendations

Recommendations include looking into the mentoring systems of women in agriculture to find direct examples of the action of the mentor to encourage career development and advancement. Another recommendation is to review academic policies and regulations to find the gaps on where women are receiving less opportunities and resources to better serve the academia world women are in especially in agriculture science disciplines.

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