

# **A Tribute to The Pavers: The Lived Experiences of Females in Agricultural Education**

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## **Introduction**

Historically, agricultural education has been a male-dominated field, with women only gaining formal access to organizations like the FFA in 1969 (Flatt, 2019). Prior to this milestone, female participation was largely relegated to symbolic roles, such as the FFA Sweetheart (Moore & Casey, 2018). This late entry created an environment where the initial presence and experiences of women were largely undocumented, and role models were scarce (Foster, 2003). Despite this late entry, the proportion of female agricultural educators has grown from 14% in 1994 to nearly 50% in 2023 (Camp, 1995; NAAE, 2023). While research has been conducted to profile female agriculture teachers and investigate their perceptions on concepts such as self-efficacy, gender-bias, and burnout (Cline et al., 2019; Cooper & Henderson, 1989; Foster, 2001; Foster, 2003; Foster & Seevers, 2004; Kelsey, 2006, 2007; Murphrey et al., 2016), there is still a lack of research that documents the efforts of the trailblazers who navigated the once heavily male-dominated profession. These women faced systemic barriers, including sexism, lack of mentorship, and challenges in balancing work and family. Their stories are essential to understanding the evolution of gender equity in agricultural education and the foundation they laid for future generations.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and document the lived experiences of pioneering women in agricultural education. Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Identify the influences that led these women to pursue careers in agricultural education.
2. Understand their experiences before and throughout their careers.
3. Examine the personal highlights and struggles they encountered.
4. Investigate existing or needed programs and initiatives to support female agricultural educators.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. One of the first publications of this theory dates back to Mary Wollstonecraft in the late eighteenth century, but significant growth in the theory's development did not occur until the 1970s (Zeigler, 2023). Feminist theory is based on the belief that structures of power and oppression exist, and highlights the experiences of the individuals who have been marginalized as a result of it (Arinder, 2020). This theory applies feminism to research to understand and explain oppression, while feminism advocates for women's rights to be equal to those of men (Gordon, 2024; Khan, 2014).

Feminist theory organizes feminism into several branches; however, this study aims to contextualize liberal feminism. Rooted in liberalism, this branch of feminist theory emphasizes welfare, both socially and economically (Tong, 1989). "Liberal feminism points to the disparity

in social conditions as the basis for women's oppression. It argues that men and women are essentially the same because they both possess the capacity to reason, and therefore equal opportunities and treatment should be the norm." (Gordon, 2024, Types of feminism section). This perspective holds that women and men are equal on all bases, such as politically, economically, and socially, and neither should be excluded to promote the other (Arinder, 2020).

"Feminist methodology is specifically concerned with how, or whether, knowledge produced about social life can be connected with the social realities of women in the context of any methodology that is dominated by men and that neglects consideration of the gendered nature of social life." (Landman, 2006, p. 430).

Therefore, a feminist epistemological approach allows the research to showcase the perspective of women who reshaped their marginalized role in formal education and agriculture among their male peers. These lived experiences exemplify perseverance despite the odds.

## **Methods**

A qualitative phenomenological design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the everyday lived experiences among the early female agricultural educators. This design was appropriate for studying the phenomenon of pioneering women in agricultural education, as it was perceived and interpreted by those who have lived the experience. The study utilized a purposive sample of five women from different states who met the criteria of having at least 30 years of experience in agricultural education. Data were collected via two-part, semi-structured interviews. The first interview focused on their experiences leading up to their career as an educator and their early years in the profession. The second interview investigated their career experiences and their perspective on the future workplace for women in the profession. The questions addressed their motivations for career choice, experiences as high school students, personal challenges and successes, mentorship, advice for future generations, and programs designed for women.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved six phases: familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Maxwell (2002) discusses the importance of "interpretive validity" (p. 48) in qualitative research, which is the factual soundness of the researcher's interpretation of the data. Therefore, member checking allows participants to verify that their voices have been accurately presented through the data and interpretations made by the researcher are sound representations of them (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2015). This study also utilized triangulation with document analysis to establish internal validity (Merriam, 2015). Credibility was established by the researcher sharing their reflexivity with the reader (Merriam, 2015). Further, the researcher consulted their committee chair for peer review throughout the data collection and analysis process, which further ensured credibility (Merriam, 2015).

## **Results/Findings**

The thematic analysis revealed five central themes that encapsulate the essence of the participants' lived experiences as pioneering women in agricultural education. These themes, influences of rural upbringing and educators on career choice, the positive impact of inclusive

agricultural educators, facing adversity, the predominance of highs over lows, and optimism for change, are presented in alignment with the specific research objectives they address.

**Objective 1- Who or what were the most significant influences for these women to become agricultural educators?**

**Theme: Rural Agriculture and Educators Influencing Career Choice**

All five participants shared that their upbringing in rural agricultural settings played a significant role in shaping their career paths. Their experiences ranged from growing up on family farms to participating in livestock care and agricultural activities. In addition to their agricultural backgrounds, four of the five women identified their high school agriculture teachers as pivotal influences. These educators not only introduced them to agricultural education but also served as mentors, role models, and advocates for their success. For example, Pam's agriculture teacher took her to visit a college campus and encouraged her to pursue teaching. Sarah's teacher, a former National FFA President, guided her through high school and later encouraged her to pursue graduate education. Isabel was recruited into agricultural education by her teacher, who recognized her potential and helped her shift from veterinary aspirations to teaching. Hailey, whose father was her agriculture teacher, was immersed in the profession from a young age and naturally gravitated toward it. Maysen brought a unique perspective as she was the only participant denied participation in agricultural education as a high school student, which was a result of her gender. She had always been involved in agriculture and held livestock-related jobs, but claimed that pure luck led her to teaching.

**Objective 2- What were the lived experiences of these individuals before and throughout their careers?**

**Theme: Positive Impact of Inclusive Agricultural Educators and Facing Adversity**

The participants' early experiences in agricultural education were shaped by inclusive environments created by their teachers. These educators treated female students equally, encouraged participation in contests and leadership roles, and fostered mentorship relationships that often lasted decades. Sarah revealed the way her agriculture teacher worked to include her in the FFA events, even though girls were not yet admitted. She shared:

“Between my junior and senior year, I was able to go on an [FFA trip]. I had an FFA jacket that just said [initials] because girls weren't admitted to FFA yet, but I was allowed to go on this trip, and it was great... And I think I had an easier time than some of the women who came after me because I participated in state-level events. I couldn't win, but like district Creed speaking, I won, but the second-place boy went to state.”

Throughout their careers, the women faced various forms of adversity, including gender-based discrimination, stereotypes, and challenges in gaining respect from peers and students. Isabel had to prove her competence in carpentry and welding, she explained:

“The first thing that I had to do was convince the boys that I knew what I was doing. My boys, cause when I first started, my cousin was in my class. I was teaching carpentry and welding as two separate classes. And so, you know, I took over after a teacher, my ag teacher, who had a real strong personality. Mine was completely different from his, so

establishing that I knew what I was doing was probably the very first challenge. My grandfather was a carpenter, and so I was able to kind of lean on him a little bit.” Despite these challenges, the participants emphasized the importance of maintaining perspective. They focused on their passion for agriculture and teaching, which helped them overcome obstacles.

### **Objective 3- What were the highlights and personal struggles during their career?**

#### **Theme: Highs Outweigh the Lows**

Although each of these women experienced challenges, the consensus is that satisfaction triumphed over the struggles. They expressed that the fulfillment came from building rapport with students and coworkers, expanding their agriculture programs, and contributing to increased student success. Participants described moments of pride when students won contests, earned scholarships, or returned to express gratitude. Isabel referred to her former students as “grand FFA members,” celebrating their continued impact in the community. Pam recalled the milestone of teaching a cohort of students for all four years of high school, while Maysen found fulfillment in developing a diversity-focused curriculum and mentoring future educators.

Struggles included balancing work and family, navigating institutional politics, and dealing with outdated gender norms. Hailey and Pam both described the difficulty of managing family responsibilities alongside demanding teaching schedules. Maysen shared a story of choosing her son’s award banquet over a professional event, affirming the importance of prioritizing family, and went on to say:

“You can’t be everywhere for your own children, or for the kids you work with. But you gotta be true to yourself. Don’t try to do it all. Try to find the things that you’re really good at. Do what you can do, but recognize there’s a lot more to life than just your career, and keep a balance.”

### **Objective Four - What programs or initiatives are in place or are needed to better support female agricultural educators?**

#### **Theme: Optimism for a Changing World**

All of these women are in agreement that “things aren’t quite like they used to be,” but for the better. Compared to when they were all entering the profession and part of the minority, the participants unanimously shared that they believe women now account for the majority of agriculture teachers. Most participants stated that they were unaware of any programs specifically designed to support women entering the profession, especially when they needed them. Instead, they took it upon themselves to make connections with the few other women in the field and then became mentors for those who followed. To offset the lack of resources for women, Maysen revealed that she was the main support system for her female colleagues, a role that was inevitable since she was the only woman in her department. She explained the impact that her efforts had on the female presence in the profession:

“Oh yeah I did in [state], that was default since I was only woman out there doing it. We had 26 women in the state out of about 250 teachers at the time. So yeah, I was who they

came to, and I was the person that did it. And then while I was there the number of female students tripled.”

Her contribution to supporting women was through research, where she investigated the experiences of women in her state and nationwide. She was then able to share her findings and support other women through presentations at various conferences and meetings. She outlined what was available at the time below:

“You know, you have to participate in a lot of things, but no, I wasn't in like an active women's leadership kind of deal. I did do a number of presentations spinning off the [research] at the [association] meetings. I was asked to come to different universities and speak on that stuff, but the only support kind of things, or career supplemental things, that I participated in were things that anybody could participate in. They were focused on teaching and improving your teaching, okay. And so, you might go for a weekend for a ‘crash course’ somewhere. So, you have faculty from all these places and you would spend two or three days talking about teaching things, but not the other.”

### **Conclusions/Discussion/Implications/Recommendations**

This study explored the experiences of pioneering women in agricultural education through four research questions that examined their influences, lived experiences, challenges, and sources of support. The findings revealed that participants’ agriculture teachers and rural upbringings were significant influences on their decision to pursue teaching. Many credited their inclusive agriculture teachers and positive program experiences for shaping their career paths, while one participant’s story of exclusion due to gender illustrated how chance and mentorship also played a role in entering the profession. Consistent with prior studies, these findings confirmed that early agricultural experiences and supportive mentors strongly impact women’s entry into agricultural education (Cooper & Henderson, 1989). Throughout their careers, participants described their teachers as lifelong mentors and reflected on both inclusion and adversity, such as facing gender-based discrimination, stereotypes, and work-life balance challenges. Despite obstacles, they emphasized maintaining perspective and passion for the profession as key to resilience.

Participants reported that the rewards of teaching far outweighed the struggles, with personal fulfillment derived from student success and meaningful relationships with students, colleagues, and community members. However, when reflecting on programs and initiatives to support women, they agreed that while opportunities have improved, there remains a lack of formal, gender-specific support systems. Most participants were unaware of such programs and instead relied on informal mentoring and peer support, highlighting the importance of work-life balance, community, and self-advocacy for sustaining career satisfaction. Aligned with Feminist theory, particularly Liberal Feminism, the study underscored that these women’s perseverance and optimism challenged gender norms within a historically male-dominated field. Their collective experiences affirm both the progress made and the ongoing need for institutional and cultural efforts to ensure equity in agricultural education.

The findings of this research suggest encouraging future generations to acknowledge, respect, and build upon the progress made in advocating for equality throughout agricultural

education. Specific emphasis should be placed on educating about best practices for balancing work and family, as this has been one of the most frequently expressed challenges for women. Furthermore, this study highlighted the significant role of agricultural education teachers in students both within and beyond the classroom. Providing professional development for agriculture teachers can better support them in developing lifelong relationships with their students.

Mentorship was mentioned as one of the fundamental aspects of developing a strong support system. Often, preservice teachers are paired with cooperating teachers at the conclusion of their preparation program, but the findings of this study report that formal mentoring programs have been identified as a need for female agricultural educators. Establishing mentor programs that connect early-career professionals with long-serving agriculture teachers can help provide professional and personal support. In addition, creating an inclusive agricultural education program was identified as a significant factor that influenced many of the positive childhood experiences of the women who participated in this study. Hence, agricultural educators should continue to implement inclusionary practices in their classrooms to create positive experiences for all students.

Limited by time and resources, it is recommended that future replication of this study include a larger sample size. Including more women, especially pioneers in the profession and early non-traditional women in agricultural education, would generate more stories that represent a wider range of regions and perspectives.

It is no secret that agricultural education was not the only profession where women experienced discrimination. It is recommended that future research investigate the phenomenon of pioneering women in other sectors of agriculture and various disciplines. While significant progress has been made in growing the representation of women in agricultural education, disparities still exist in some states. The researcher suggests an investigation in states where there is still a significant gap in gender representation of agricultural educators. This could be accomplished by documenting the thoughts and experiences of the women who are part of the minority population, as well as those who were employed in that state and have since left.

Lastly, this study included representation from secondary and postsecondary agricultural education, but did not examine why some chose to advance their career. Therefore, the researcher recommends that future research focus on motivating factors or influences on women's decision to teach in higher education. This could provide insight into their experiences in secondary education, their ambitions, and their preferences for workplace environments.

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