

Breaking the 'grass ceiling': More women are farming

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For decades, women were viewed as the behind-the-scene sidekicks to their husbands who planted seed, fixed equipment and fed livestock. But that's changing as more women take over operations.



Denise O'Brien waters tomato seedlings at her Atlantic, Iowa, farm.(Photo: Mary Chind, Gannett)

Story Highlights

- More women are thrust into farming as they outlive their fathers or husbands
- In Iowa, 20% of the state's farmland is owned by women
- More than 200 million acres of U.S. farmland will change hands by 2027

WASHINGTON — The popularity of the "God created a farmer" ad during the Super Bowl last month was widely praised as a fitting tribute to the millions of people working in agriculture.

But of the more than a dozen pictures of hardworking and sensitive farmers and ranchers in the commercial, only a handful of the images shown during the two-minute ad were women.

The slight is being viewed by some as symbolic of the battle women across the country are engaging in as they play an increasing role in a field that has been traditionally dominated by men.

"That image of (a man) is so embedded in all of us that it's hard to imagine that women are part of farming when they show an ad like that. On one hand, it's a really nice tribute to agriculture, but on the other hand, they're missing more than half the population that's involved with it," said Denise O'Brien who has been farming with her husband for almost 40 years in Atlantic, Iowa.

"Women, because they are going against the trend of males dominating agriculture, it takes people a while to make a head adjustment that 'Oh I'm talking to this woman who is a farmer rather than talking to a farmer's wife,' " she said.

For decades, women were viewed as the supportive behind-the-scene sidekicks to their husbands and sons who were planting seed, fixing equipment and feeding livestock. In most cases, women were depended on to keep the house running and make sure the farm's paperwork was up to date and the bills were paid.

Today, things have changed. Now, more women are being thrust into farming as they outlive their fathers or husbands, leaving them with the responsibility of deciding what to do with land that in many cases has been in the family for decades.

More women also are making the decision to enter agriculture on their own accord with a focus largely on smaller livestock operations, organic crops or farms that grow fruit and produce for the local community.

In the U.S. Agriculture Department's 2007 Census of Agriculture report, the government found women farm operators increased 19% from 2002, far outpacing the 7% increase in the number of farmers overall. The government census allows a farm to have multiple operators. Women were the principal operator, the individual in charge of day-to-day operations, on 14% of farms and ranches compared with 11% five years earlier.

The government is updating its agricultural census later this year and the number of women involved in farming is expected to be "much higher," said Kathleen Merrigan, USDA's second-most powerful official, said last month. Until she resigned last week, Merrigan was in charge of overseeing the daily operations of the department.



Denise O'Brien of Atlantic, Iowa, has been farming with her husband for almost 40 years.(Photo: Mary Chind, Gannett)

As more women enter the male-dominated field, they'll be managing an even bigger share of farmland, especially in the agriculture-intensive Midwest. In Iowa, 20% of the state's farmland is owned by women and 10% is owned by single women over the age of 75, according to Michael Duffy, an economics professor at Iowa State University.

As more farmland changes hands, those figures are expected to grow. University researchers have estimated more than 200 million acres of farmland in the United States will change hands by 2027, with women potentially owning a majority of the land.

That's good news for the growing number of women across the country who are members of the National FFA Organization, which first allowed women to join in 1969. The group, better known by its former name, the Future Farmers of America, is made up of 44% women, compared with 20% in 1988.

During USDA's annual outlook conference last month near Washington, Merrigan saw firsthand evidence that although women are making progress in agriculture, many don't believe they are receiving the attention that reflects the more active role they are playing.

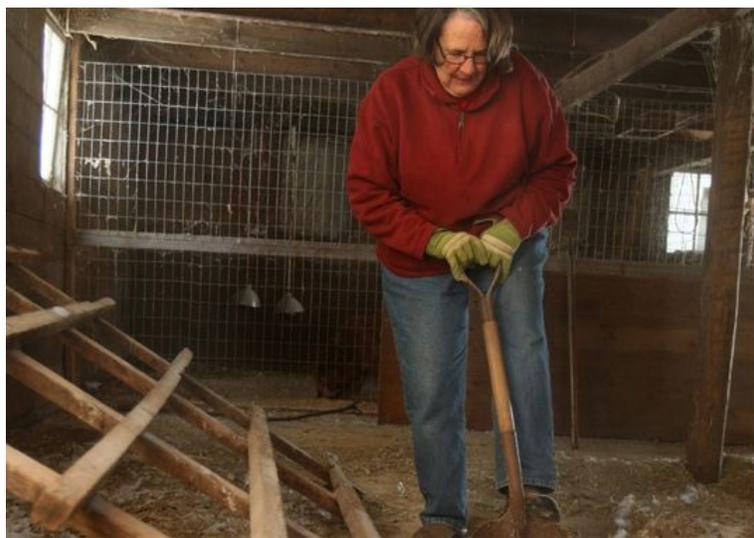
For the first time, the USDA held a 30-minute session to allow women at the mostly-male-attended event to network. In the room, USDA set up two "idea boards" asking women what they wanted to see at next year's conference. One respondent suggested having "more women as speakers throughout the agenda" while another proposed a paper "on the important role of women in agriculture."

Merrigan said she had expressed concern to conference organizers because a poster touting the event had only one woman on it: her.

"I think we are making progress, but it's time to accelerate," Merrigan said in an interview. "It just takes time to shift everybody's thinking to the realities of today. We just need to get everybody out of thinking about things in the same old way. It's not just about women; it's about the changing demographics of this country."

To do that, dozens of groups that focus on helping women break through the "grass ceiling" of agriculture have sprung up across the United States. Several have limited their membership to only women after observing that women, especially older ones, were more outspoken and willing to ask questions without men present.

A popular program called Annie's Project teaches classes in 27 states to help foster problem solving, recordkeeping and decision-making among farm women. The classes regularly fill up. Another group, the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN), founded by Denise O'Brien in 1997, hosts meetings to give advice and allow women to ask questions and talk about their experiences on the farm.



Denise O'Brien cleans out a chicken coop to prepare for a new batch of chicks on Atlantic, Iowa farm.(Photo: Mary Chind, Gannett)

In Washington, the USDA, which in the past has been accused of discrimination by some women farmers and ranchers for denying them loans and other assistance, has undertaken a series of initiatives to reach out to female farmers. The USDA has developed an outreach program to increase the number of women owning and operating profitable farms and agriculture-related businesses. The department also has women in a number of high-profile positions, including the undersecretary for food safety and its chief of staff .

"Women are starting to rise up through the ranks and be recognized," said Ann Sorensen, research director for American Farmland Trust, a group focused on protecting the country's farm and ranch land. "Although within the state commodity groups and state farm bureaus there is very, very little representation, embarrassingly little representation by women, but I think that is going to change."

Danelle Myer, a fifth-generation farmer in Harrison County, Iowa, hasn't let the challenges of both starting a farm or being a female in agriculture deter her. After growing up on a farm, she graduated high school and distanced herself from the farm life that she "didn't want to have anything to do with." But 20 years later, drawn by the lure of nurturing the land and growing food in an environmentally friendly way, she returned.

Myer, who started with a half-acre of land, is poised to expand her profitable business to 5 acres within a few years. For the first time, the organic vegetable farmer is planning to hire part-time workers in 2013 to help her pick tomatoes, lettuce, spinach and potatoes and do other work on the farm.

When she started out, Myer, now 41, said she didn't know what local farmers would think of her trying her hand at organic farming while they tended to their thousand-plus-acre corn and soybean operations.

"I've actually been ... very welcomed by my community," Myer said. "I feel like those older, white men are admiring women like me because they know how hard the work is. Being female I don't think has been a barrier to me in my situation. I feel like it makes me different and people appreciate what I'm doing."

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**Source:** USA Today: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/17/women-farmers-increasing/1993009/>

# Breaking the grass ceiling: On U.S. farms, women are taking the reins

By Lori Rotenberk

For 56-year-old Tammy Burnell, who lost everything she owned in the 2008 Iowa floods, it's the freedom to stand in the verdant fields of Burnell Farms in Royston, Ga., and call out to the heavens — and know no one can hear her.

Hannah Breckbill, 25, walked from a career as a mathematician and settled in Elgin, Minn., planting Humble Hands Harvest “to work in something real and be the change I want to see happen in this world.”

Forty-one-year-old Pilar Rebar quit her job as a pesticide applicator when she realized she had been told lies about the chemicals she was spraying on crops. Vowing to only grow “clean and healthy food,” she started up Sunnyside Organic Seedlings in Richmond, Calif.

Meet three of America's female farmers, the most rapidly growing segment of the nation's changing agricultural landscape. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service reported last month that the number of woman-operated farms more than doubled between 1982 and 2007. Add primary and secondary operators, and there are nearly 1 million women in farming, accounting for 30 percent of U.S. farmers.

So hot is ag life that novels about farming are replacing chick lit, offering an unexpected twist to the notion of dirty romance.



Unlike the Farmettes and Women's Land Army that took over while men fought in World War II, women today see farming as both a mission and a passion. Some want to provide healthy food for the masses. Others are looking to build community or live a life of deeper meaning.

“Women want to be outside, they want to be near family. There’s lots of interest in where our food comes from, how it was grown,” says Kathleen Merrigan, former deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. “We are seeing more beginning farmers coming in and I think the trend is going to continue. Women are [already] outnumbering men in owning smaller farms.”

They arrive on farms — urban and rural, large and small — from two opposite worlds. Many are 40 and older, leaving behind office jobs and careers for the opportunity to get their hands dirty and create something tangible. At the other end of the spectrum are younger women who are coming out of agricultural and environmental science programs with a dedication to food justice, education, and reminding a nation led astray by fast food and TV dinners where its sustenance really comes from. There is also an older generation of women who have outlived their husbands and now own vast amounts of farm and ranchland.

Combined, they are making new inroads for women who are determined to build a life around farming.

Tammy Steele, director of the Oklahoma-based National Women In Agriculture Association, says female farmers have gained the respect not only of the USDA but also of the national farming community. That was missing, Steele explains, during the ’60s back-to-the-land movement, when women were more concerned with breaking the glass ceiling in corporate America than they were in tilling the earth.

What’s more, female farmers have shattered the old stereotypes. St. Paul, Minn.’s Der Thou grows flowers. Teresa Brockman of Eureka, Ill., grows 25 varieties of fruit on her Sunny Lane Farm. Debby Zygielbaum, in her 30s, raises sheep and grows organic grapes, olives, and fruits for Robert Sinskey Vineyards in Napa Valley, Calif. These women are a garden of variety.



Kristina Beuning runs a community-supported agriculture operation and owns the Sunbow Farm in Eau Claire, Wis. She’s been farming for 10 years.

Women do face some unique challenges in this business. Since women’s farms tend to be smaller, many need assistance with business plans and financing. Access to equipment can be limited. Many seek advice on marketing and how to get their goods to the public. As a result, we’ve seen the emergence of organizations such as the National Women In Agriculture Association and the

Women, Food and Agriculture Network, both of which are seeing their memberships soar, as well as other, less formal networks.

Not everyone needs help, of course. Haylene Green, 68, farms alone on a single acre in Atlanta's tough West End, raising organic Caribbean vegetables, among them her famous "huge fatty bum-bum" tropical pumpkins. But others set up businesses with friends, sisters, brothers, same-sex partners, fathers, mothers. They've created sisterhoods, networks for sharing livestock and tractors, seeds, labor, financial assistance, and know-how.

Many of these networks are still unrecognized by the mainstream, but some are breaking into the open. Soil Sisters offers tours of organic farms in south-central Wisconsin as part of MOSES, the Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Service. The MOSES Rural Women's Project is led by 46-year-old Lisa Kivirist of Browntown, Wis., who with her husband left a career in advertising at Chicago's Leo Burnett 17 years ago to start the Inn Serendipity Farm and B&B. Annie's Project, which offers assistance with everything from risk management to business plans to marketing, has expanded nationally.

It makes perfect sense, says Merrigan, the former USDA chief: "Women are agriculturalists globally. The U.S. is trying to catch up."

What is most apparent, though, is how content these women are with their agrarian lives. "Women make the food choices, they make the choices on what to feed their family, so their movement into farming is very natural," says Temra Costa, author of *Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat* and the force behind the website Farmer Jane. Costa lives outside of Oakland, Calif., where she homesteads with chickens and a small vegetable plot.

Tammy Burnell, for her part, says she's known she wanted to be a farmer since she was 6 years old. Throughout the years she kept having a dream, even though she lived in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, that she was growing vegetables in Georgia, near a pond. "Then the flood came and we lost everything," Burnell says. What next? She typed "Georgia Organics" into Google and up came an 85-acre farm for rent. "So we loaded our '57 red Chevy truck bearing a water ring from the flood and took off."

Burnell uses a plot of the farm she rents to teach young women to farm. She calls them "the blooms." "What do I love about farming? Teaching. And being able to say I want a fresh salad and walking 20 feet and picking lettuce or a sweet pea for me and a customer," Burnell says. "Like all the women farming and wanting to farm, I know this: We all want to lift our hands and praise the food, trees, and birds, and scream on the top of our lungs how great it is. And no one hears, not a soul."

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Source: Grist.com: <http://grist.org/food/breaking-the-grass-ceiling-on-u-s-farms-women-are-taking-the-reins/>