AGAINST THE GRAIN

FEMALE FARMERS WORKING TO CLOSE OREGON’S GENDER GAP

Words: Erin Hampton
Lindsey Trempler, 31, sweeps the green tips of her ponytail away from her face as she studies budding onions in one of the five raised beds that make up Trempler Family Farms in Corvallis, Oregon. Behind the weatherworn fence of her backyard, a small, temporary greenhouse hides rows of dripping herbs and vegetables.

Seventy miles away in Molalla, 57-year-old Phyllis Morris hunts for unwanted pests beneath the shade of her 10,000 hazelnut trees. The canopy of interlocking branches deters soft rain droplets, creating a safe haven for her mug of steaming tea.

In East Portland, 38-year-old Leah Rodgers crouches near a bed of vegetables in her urban farm, ignoring the cars rushing by just feet away on a busy street. Houses peek over the surrounding wooden fence, and a rusted wheelbarrow awaits its next task.
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Though their farms look different, Trempler, Morris and Rodgers share a connection. They’re more than 300 women around the state who participate in Oregon State University’s Small Farms networks for female farmers.

A gender gap between men and women sweeps many of the nation’s economic sectors, and the agriculture industry sees a large lack of women in the field. However, when compared to the rest of the nation, Oregon has seen a significant rise of female farmers and sits well above the national average.

The farm networks are not the reason there are so many female farmers in Oregon, nor do they reach the whole farming population. However, for women who participate, farm networks have made the path to success in farming more viable by providing access to mentorship and supportive tip-sharing with other women.

“It’s about educating each other,” Morris said about the networks. “And it’s about seeing new promises for things.” She added, “I’m grateful for their presence and their friendship and their information sharing.”
Female farmers make up a relatively small share of the U.S. agricultural workforce. According to census data, only 21.7 percent of the nation’s agricultural workers were women in 2012, and women made up only 13.7 percent of principal operators or farm directors. In Oregon, these percentages were 39 and 21 percent, respectively.

The reason behind these numbers isn’t precisely known, but some farm officials think that Oregon’s focus on local farming could be a contributing factor, as women tend to own smaller farms than men.

Of the female principal operators in Oregon, 73 percent operate smaller than 50 acres. However, among both men and women in Oregon, the average farm size is 474 acres, implying that men tend to own significantly larger farms than women.

“We can’t make the conclusion that all women are small farmers, because they are in larger agriculture as well,” Oregon Department of Agriculture Director Katy Coba noted. “But a lot more small farmers do tend to be women.”

Oregon is a destination for small farmers. The state ranks 15th for number of farmers’ markets in the nation, but second in farm-direct sales per customer, the primary market for small farmers. In fact, the value of farm-direct sales in Oregon grew by 144 percent to $56 million from 2002 to 2007, which is nearly four times the national average, according to census data.

Communities like the OSU farm networks provide a forum where these women can share experiences.

“The women farmers networks serve as a way to bring women together to talk about their challenges of being a farmer, or one of the other roles they have in life that plays into that,” said Melissa Fery, a Small Farms program Senior Instructor at OSU. “It serves as a way to gain information, to learn from each other. And I believe without the network, they wouldn’t be as connected.”
A HOME FOR FEMALE FARMERS

In 2007 Fery gathered 10 women to discuss their role in Oregon’s agriculture industry. Nine years later, this group of women has transformed into three women’s farm networks: Willamette Women’s Farm Network, the League of Women Farmers and Women in Agriculture.

At monthly meetings, members share tool techniques and planting information. Experienced farmers also host farm tours to teach newcomers hands-on lessons about their specialty.

Outside of the meetings, each network also has a Facebook group where women create events for personal farm tours, share articles about seasonal crop care and sign up for workshops.

Although it’s one of the more successful states, Oregon isn’t the only one to rely on female farm networks. According to Bridget Holcomb, Executive Director of the international Women Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN), Oregon is a leader in female farm networks.

However, it’s not alone. Holcomb’s network, founded in 1997, has expanded into a community of 5,000 women across the globe. She sees the networks as a place for women to share resources, but more importantly as a stereotype-free space. Through these networks, she believes women garner more support in their jobs.

“It’s a big problem when you go into a bank and you’re not taken seriously because you’re a woman and have a farm outside of male-dominated agriculture,” said Holcomb.

Ideally, Holcomb would like to see support for farmers unaffected by gender. She sees farming networks as a step in the right direction.
Though her thin-framed glasses slide down her nose as words fly out of her mouth, Phyllis Morris has no intention of changing her train of thought long enough to correct them. Her delicate hands push aside her auburn bangs, and the skin around her eyes folds into soft wrinkles as she explains the perfect way to trim weeds.

She lives and breathes farming. “I’m really proud of farming,” said Morris. “I’m proud that I’m doing something that helps feed the world.”

Morris bought her hazelnut farm with her husband in 2004 after she left her job in the pharmaceutical industry. Though they were exhilarated to be able to afford their dream, they were not initially connected to a strong farming community.

This changed when Morris found the Oregon Hazelnut Growers Association. As she communicated with other hazelnut farmers and suppliers, she learned more about the processes of maintaining healthy trees and began pioneering new hazelnut farming techniques.

Morris was named Innovator of the Year twice through the Hazelnut Association: once for being the first hazelnut farmer to use compost tea on her farm, and a second time for collaborating with her husband on the invention of the “Desuckenator,” a device resembling a giant weed-whacker that attaches to a tractor and trims invasive plant species.
Morris thrived in the hazelnut community, but she was one of a few women in a male-dominated field. She felt alone.

"Going to the hazelnut meetings and the commission meetings, I’d be the only woman there,” said Morris. “Before I got involved in the farming network with OSU, I felt isolated, truly. I was just grabbing for any piece of information I could and it seemed like there was hardly anything out there."

Now, after several years with the Willamette Women’s Farm Network, Morris hosts her own farm tours, gives demonstrations of “The Desuckenator” and teaches other efficient methods she’s picked up in her farming career.

“The women have impacted me greatly, to a point where I don’t feel isolated at all anymore,” she said. “I feel like at any point in time I can get on my computer and reach out and somebody will give me an answer, a place to go, a resource, you know? It’s really expanded my ability to feel like I’m part of a larger group.”

Other women seem to agree.

In 2012, the leaders of the women’s farm networks conducted a survey on the importance of the program.

More than 100 women responded, detailing why women’s agriculture networks are valuable; only two percent of respondents said that they didn’t believe there was a need for a program that specifically addresses the needs of women in agriculture.

One woman posed the question, “How would we learn, how do we find role models, see success or hear about success without it? Hope and dreams are built on and because of this program.”

Another said, “Women are often represented as farmers or ranchers’ wives, not as farmers or ranchers themselves. Because of this, women need role models that empower them and show them that they can succeed in an agricultural occupation even without the umbrella of an active male partner.”

With her youthful face and green-tipped hair, Lindsey Trempler often surprises people when she tells them she’s a farmer.

“When I say I’m a farmer, they say, ‘Really?!’ And all of a sudden there’s a torrent of questions,” said Trempler. “And I’m not sure if that’s because I’m a woman, if that’s because I’m young, or if it’s just because they’ve never really met a farmer and now they have access to this person that they can ask all these questions. But it puts me in a minority group, and it’s a little bit strange to people.”
Trempler started farming as a little girl in rural Michigan, helping her parents garden and care for pigs, chickens, turkeys, and geese. After spending several years in nuclear medicine, she grew tired of the hospital setting and returned to her love of the earth.

“The hospital system itself was just taking a little bit of my soul away from me,” said Trempler. “And so I thought, well, how about farming? I grew up doing that. I know I really love it.” Trempler and her partner moved from Colorado to the Willamette Valley because of the fertile land and abundant rainfall.

Now, as she stands beneath a stormy sky and gazes at the budding produce in front of her, it’s as if Trempler immediately settled back into her childhood comfort with farming.

However, when she first got to Oregon, Trempler knew few people in the industry. Soon after her move, she happened upon the Willamette Women’s Farm Network.

Trempler says she could not succeed without the support of her partner, but she has also found solace, resources, and camaraderie in the WWFN and other farm programs around the state.

She utilizes resources like the Master Gardener hotline through Small Farms, which allows farmers to call and ask questions about subjects ranging from beneficial insect species to food preservation. Trempler also participates in FarmHer, a national support system for female farmers.
Trempler believes these programs allow women to communicate with each other without condescension. You’re not getting this, ‘Oh, you’re just a silly female. You’re just a silly girl. What are you doing? You’re gonna break it. Don’t do that. Don’t get dirty.’ So a woman will treat another woman like a person,” said Trempler.

As she strolls between the new raised beds, Trempler already envisions more for her farm. Excitement builds on her face while she describes her plans to create an online order service, where she can deliver fresh food to people who don’t have time to shop or grow it themselves.

Though she started farming commercially only a month ago, Trempler hopes to pass on the information she gains along the way to future aspiring farmers.

“I personally can’t contribute a whole lot right now because I don’t have a whole lot,” she said. “Eventually I would love if another new farmer comes in and I can help her and pass it on down the line.”

Urban farmer Leah Rodgers hears cars speeding by on a typical workday rather than chirping birds and quiet neighbors, but she too is one of the more than 22,000 female farmers in Oregon.
Rodgers transitioned from a food activist to an agricultural worker when she was 26 and searching for a way to learn more about her food. Through an internship in Maryland, she worked on a 16-acre farm and gained first-hand experience in the food industry.

“I heard about these passions that just sort of call people, and I was waiting to find my passion,” said Rodgers. “And at this farm, farming just spoke to me. From that point on, I’ve been a farmer or engaged in agriculture.”

After moving with her partner to Oregon to work with McMenamin’s Edgefield farm property, Rodgers decided she wanted to become a farm owner, and due to lack of accessible land outside of city limits, opened Rockwood Urban Farm a block from her house in East Portland in 2012.

She notes that, though she has gained valuable information and resources from the Women in Agriculture network, some of the most precious experiences these women share are off the farm.

“Sometimes a few of us will get together and we’ll go have a healing session, or we’ll go soak in some hot springs water or have wine and talk about our aches and pains,” she explained. “You know, farming can be pretty isolating as a profession. And even as an urban farmer, even though I’m surrounded by people, I’m often with myself a lot. So it’s just nice to get together and have a sense of community and a sense of understanding, mutual appreciation, for what each other does.”

With the support of her partner and the farmers around her, Rodgers trades price lists, collaborates with other farmers around Portland, and gains insight into the barriers faced by other women.

“We want to be our own boss. Farming is a great way to assume that, to be our own bosses and masters of our own worlds,” she said. “I would rather be enslaved to the land than to the man.”
Although the OSU farm networks stabilize and support hundreds of women around the state, they still run into some access and attendance issues.

Fery points out that as women find success in farming, they get busier and have less time to come to meetings. Furthermore, only a small percentage of women farmers in Oregon actively participate in the networks, a fact attributed in part to lack of geographic accessibility.

To grow their efforts, the Small Farms Program is in the process of creating a fourth network aimed toward women in central Oregon who don’t yet have a convenient meeting location.

Social media networks like Facebook keep the women engaged as meetings become difficult to schedule, but several women say farm tours are among the most important network experiences. Without meetings, they miss the ability to learn hands-on.

As women become more dominant in agriculture, programs like the Small Farms women’s farm networks could provide a space for female farmers to learn without the weight of traditional stereotypes.

Phyllis Morris, Lindsey Trempler and Leah Rodgers lead different lives, but they all know what it’s like to be a female farmer. And they all say they love it.

“I feel really proud to be one of the one percent,” said Morris. “And I’m hopefully doing a really good job and making other people proud that I’m a farmer, because I’m trying to think of what’s the best for my world, and that’s also your world. And I want to do the best for both of us.”

“I love it,” Trempler added. “I do it because I love it. And I feel like I’m making a difference. I feel like I’m doing good for the community. I know I’m doing much better for my soul than what I was doing. I can provide food for my family, and I can provide food for my neighbors. I’m making a difference.”

Rodgers said, “Women are natural healers. And I think our planet and our communities and our social structures need a lot of healing. So I think that it’s a natural inclination of women to put ourselves in service in a way that heals the community, heals our planet, heals our environment. And food is a way to do that.”

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