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Our Gendered Food Chain

Jasmine T. Colahan
Gettysburg College

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Our Gendered Food Chain

Abstract

Over the past four decades, the number of women-operated farms has nearly doubled. Including both primary and secondary operators, one million women make up [thirty percent of all U.S. farmers](#).

Headlines such as “Females Take the Reins,” “Meet the New face of Agriculture,” “[Old McDonald Might Be a Lady](#)” demonstrate this gender shift. And, it is true in my life too. As I worked on the [Painted Turtle Farm](#) this summer, the majority of my role models, co-workers, and mentors working in agriculture, whether rural or urban, were primarily women. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, agriculture, farming, women

Disciplines

Agricultural Science | Agriculture | Food Science | Women's Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

OUR GENDERED FOOD CHAIN

November 25, 2013

*“They said farmworker women were talking about the fields as the *fiels de calzón*, or ‘fields of panties,’. They referred to the fields as the ‘green motel.’” – U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*

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Headlines such as “Females Take the Reins,” “Meet the New face of Agriculture,” “[Old McDonald Might Be a Lady](#)” demonstrate this gender shift. And, it is true in my life too. As I worked on the [Painted Turtle Farm](#) this summer, the majority of my role models, co-workers, and mentors working in agriculture, whether rural or urban, were primarily women.

At first I was surprised. Like most, I had imagined the typical American farmer as an older white man next to a John Deere tractor and a field of corn. This depiction of the face of American agriculture is increasingly false. Whether the draw to alternative agriculture is based on environmental or food justice concerns, discontent with the existing food system, or the independence and practicality of the job, [more women are sowing the seeds](#) of an agricultural movement.

Agriculture isn’t the only sector that brings food from the fields to our plates, though. Including production, processing, service and distribution, there are 20 million people in the industry. Yet, we rarely hear about the women standing on the poultry processing or apple packaging line. Their struggles with sexual harassment, wage inequality, humiliation, health, and safety on the job are as seldom discussed.

How is it that the one group of women is getting lots of attention while another is largely unheard?

Unlike the new wave of female farm operators who are educated ([60% have some college or completed college and beyond](#)) and can take out loans or apply for credit in order to start their farms, the women that enter other food chain jobs are restricted by socioeconomic and citizenship status. It’s currently estimated that [immigrant labor comprises nearly half the commercial food production workforce](#) and that an estimated [630,000 of the 3](#)



[million people who work as migrant and seasonal farmhands are women](#). The majority of workers in these more corporate agricultural settings are undocumented immigrants dependent on labor contractors. They more commonly face [sexual harassment, threats and even denial of payment](#).

The dichotomy between the movement and support of young female growers operating small-scale farms and the abasement of women as laborers is due to an imbalance of power in industrial settings.

The infrastructure of most large-scale farms has been the same since the agricultural boom in the early 1900s. Within this model, more than half of all food production and processing workers are composed of people of color and their pay is far less than white counterparts. Latina women receive the lowest wages, less than what a white woman and oftentimes [half of what a white man would make](#).

Expectations and allowances for women are also antiquated, with [approximately 92% of supervisors and foremen being older males](#) who have full authority over female and younger workers. Women laborers, who are often living in poverty, rely on men to supply jobs and evaluate and pay them. Women work on primarily male dominated crews, which reduce the likelihood that sexual violence will be reported. This is magnified largely because many female farmworkers are undocumented immigrants and are afraid to speak out for fear of becoming unemployed or deported. The combination of financial desperation, the lack of harassment policy, and struggles with immigration status make large-scale agricultural workers vulnerable to workplace violence and even [less inclined to report the crimes](#).

While it is great that the rise of female farmers working in small-scale organic agriculture and their commitment to food justice have been positively highlighted in the media, our focus should broaden. The disparities in large-scale agricultural businesses—those which have been largely overlooked—should also be at the center of the discussion. It is incredibly important that we understand all the sides of where our food comes from and how those working in all levels of the food chain are affected by what and how we eat. Wage gaps, immigration issues, race, and gender add to the broken industrial agriculture model and cause groups of people to become increasingly less visible as the system expands.

In addition to this new wave of innovative agriculture, support for other aspects of the food justice movement are needed. We need to promote a humane system that supports better working conditions, career mobility, legal support, immigration reform, as well as dignity and respect for the workers who help produce and sustain America's food system.

Let's start by shifting the image of the American farmer from the "Old MacDonald" stereotype to the diverse group of individuals who produce the food we consume.

Jasmine Colahan '15
Contributing Writer

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