

How can women achieve their full potential in the agricultural sector?

Women play a major role in agriculture but their contribution is often overlooked. How can their role be recognised and their interests represented more effectively?



Policy and Practice Notes

**Note No. 3 – Women in farming
and the agriculture sector**
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The Rural Economy and Land Use series of Policy and Practice Notes is published by Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy and aims to communicate the latest research on rural and land use challenges to a wide audience.

Research commissioned by the Scottish Government into the role of women in farming has shown that women's contribution to the farming industry is significant but with appropriate support from policymakers and farming organisations they could achieve even more.

What role do women play in farming in the UK?

Research commissioned by the Scottish Government and carried out in Scotland showed that women:

- Play a major role in Scottish agriculture.
- Participate in the full range of farming activities.
- May be combining farm work with off farm paid/voluntary work and/or childcare and household management.
- Like their male counterparts are extremely busy, working long hours, particularly when they are new entrants to the industry.
- May come into farming by choice or via marriage into a farming family.
- Are often innovative and if not raised on a farm may bring a fresh perspective to the farm business.

Are women able to fulfil their career aspirations on the farm?

Most of the women surveyed (90%) believe their role is important but:

- Over a third think their career is progressing more slowly than they would like and 41% say their existing skills are underutilised.
- While over half say they have a role in both day to day and major decision making, 20% say this is not the case and over half would like the opportunity to play a bigger part in decision making.
- Lack of time is cited as a barrier for many in advancing their role, with competing demands such as childcare and also lack of financial resources holding them back.
- They lack training opportunities tailored to their needs.

What part is played by inheritance?

The cultural practice of passing large farms intact to one son is seen as a major barrier to women's entry into agriculture. This means that:

- Women are unlikely to inherit land unless they have no brothers.
- On tenanted crofts in Scotland there are particular issues as only one tenant can be named and this tends to be a male partner.
- Women may select themselves out of the industry because they have no expectation of inheritance, or may be discouraged from taking up tasks on the farm during childhood or acquiring skills as they grow up.

Are women represented in farming organisations?

Women are significantly underrepresented in farming organisations, meaning that:

- There are few women in elected positions and in many cases whole committees and boards have no female elected member.
- There is a belief among some farmers of both sexes that men would refuse to vote for female candidates.
- There are examples of exclusionary practices, such as all-male dinners or women being asked to leave meetings once the social component is finished.
- An environment is created that feels hostile to women and may undermine their confidence.
- Even though there is often farm membership, it is nonetheless presumed that the "head of household" – usually the male – is the member and he will be eligible to stand for election, while other family members are not.
- Some women choose to join women-only organisations eg Ladies in Beef; Women in Dairy, where they may feel more comfortable, but might also be diverted from aiming for a more influential role in mainstream organisations such as the NFU.

How do the opportunities offered to women in farming compare with those in other types of family business?

Women in all types of business both within and outside the agricultural sector are juggling home life and professional responsibilities, but in non-farming businesses:

- There are fewer issues for women becoming involved in business associations and many hold senior elected positions.
- Although some sectors have a gender imbalance the number of women in these is generally increasing and there seems to be a greater awareness of the need for gender equality.
- Access to business training does not seem to be as much of a problem as it is in farming.
- Women are often able to combine childcare with professional responsibilities more easily, even bringing their children to work if necessary, with far fewer safety issues arising than would be the case in farming.
- Inheritance of businesses and/or resources does not seem to be a barrier to women's entry as it is in farming.

What benefits would a positive approach to gender equality bring to the farming industry?

Diversity is always a benefit to any business environment, bringing wider perspectives and the opportunity for new approaches. If enabled to play a more substantial role, women in farming could potentially contribute, among other benefits:

- New ideas for diversification and for adding value to existing businesses.
- A good understanding of consumer needs and preferences.
- Novel ideas for innovation that move beyond the traditional or "the way that things have always been done", eg an approach to the design of the farmyard, farm equipment and other resources that relies less on brawn, and would benefit not only women but ageing farmers and those with disabilities or health issues.
- Clearer and fairer communication within farming families about issues such as succession planning, inheritance and resources.



What steps need to be taken to achieve this?

Polymakers need to consider:

- Challenging the inheritance patterns of farming. In Scotland the cultural norm is to pass the farm intact to one son, perpetuating the idea of farming as a male activity.
- Promoting better advice and more clarity about succession planning for farming families.
- Providing financial incentives for the purchase of equipment appropriate for women and safer for all users.
- Grant support for the kinds of diversification activities that women want to initiate on the farm.
- Provision of training opportunities that fit with women's lives, acknowledge existing skills and support their career aspirations within the farming industry.

Farming organisations need to consider:

- An approach that brings women into mainstream organisations rather than marginalising them in women-only organisations or networks.
- A quota system to ensure women's representation and promote the idea of female members as "the norm"; a critical mass of 30% is generally acknowledged as necessary to change organisational culture.
- A talent bank of women willing to stand for election and a commitment to bringing young women into the system and helping them to develop skills they would need as elected board and committee members.



Project information

In 2016 the Scottish Government's Rural and Environmental Science and Analytical Services Division commissioned research on "Women in Farming and the Agriculture Sector". The overall purpose of this research was to establish a baseline position on women in farming and agriculture in order to inform policies to enhance the role of women in these sectors. The research was led by researchers at the Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University, and the James Hutton Institute, Craigiebuckler, Aberdeen.

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Further information

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