

Why aren't we fighting harder?

It's time to win back the ground that farm women have lost in the past 30 years

Last issue, Saskatchewan farmer Leigh Rosengren challenged women to have an honest conversation about the career barriers individual women face living on farms in rural Canada. Further investigation reveals we need a hard look at the agriculture industry as a whole. Despite decades of work, women are still largely shut out of ownership, leadership roles, and employment at the highest levels.

Women make up only a quarter of agricultural managers, 29 per cent of agricultural business owners and a mere 12 per cent of the heads of our national and provincial associations, according to data collected by the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council.

This despite the fact more women in agriculture have a higher level of post-secondary education and leadership training than their male counterparts, and despite burgeoning provincial and national women's organizations. So where the hell are we? And why don't we seem to be fighting harder?

DO WOMEN REALLY CARE?

Jean Harrington has a theory about the lack of representation of women in agriculture and — fair warning — you might not like it. She's brisk, she's honest, and she's terrified at how much of the ground that was won 30 years ago has now been lost. She fears today's farm women don't fully understand what is at stake.

Harrington owns and operates Prairie Farm Brokerage in Outlook, Sask., and farms 7,400 acres with her



husband John in nearby Glenside. She sat on the board of Saskatchewan Pulse Growers, and was an appointed member of the Western Standards Committee for the Canadian Grain Commission.

Harrington's journey to leadership started in the mid-1980s when she sat on the founding board of the Saskatchewan Women's Agricultural Network. SWAN was formed to provide women with information, skills and networking opportunities related to their roles on the farm. Its organizers hoped to give women agency to tackle the issues they faced, including big issues like ensuring the new Matrimonial Property Act would give farm women the right to some of the money and equity they'd helped to build.



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“There was a big uproar in the farming community at that,” she laughs. “Even my father-in-law was concerned that I was going to leave John and take the family farm.”

Rural child care, parity on the farm, representation in the industry; SWAN was not afraid to dive into the weeds. “I was so incredibly proud of SWAN when it started,” Harrington says. “We fought hard for all of this stuff, not just for women in agriculture, but for women in general.”

Then the financial hit of the late '80s. “The farm didn't pay and we all went out and found jobs. And we found that we loved it; the income, the interaction, the

independence. We congratulated ourselves that everything had been accomplished, and we didn't pay attention. We thought we won the war, but we dropped the ball, and today we are not one step further along in the big picture with women in agriculture than we were 30 years ago... In fact I look at social media and how women do this work, and we have actually reverted back further than 30 years ago, and often we've done it to ourselves.”

Ouch. You might wonder how she can say this; just look at the multitude of groups and organizations representing women in agriculture across the country, how many conferences they hold, how much networking is going on. And while it's true these things are happening, Harrington's unease is warranted. It seems we network a lot, but to what end? It's great to forge relationships with allies who face the same challenges and to build leadership skills, but if these are not turned into action and policy initiatives, aren't we just talking to ourselves? Harrington argues the problem is a lack of relevant content and an absence of broad-based leadership.

“Some of these conferences are stupidly upbeat,” she says. Harrington recently declined an invitation to speak at one high-profile conference because the organizer told her it didn't matter what she talked about, as long as she was “super positive.” “That's not good enough. And so much of it is counter-productive to the role of women in basic agriculture. And those who don't want to be media darlings are actually hurt by this.”

Double ouch.

WHERE'D THE LEADERS GO?

“We have a missing generation,” Harrington says, arguing the relative affluence of the past 20 years has left women now 35 to 50 years old oblivious to issues relevant to women in agriculture. “Too many daughters were never taught how to give a damn about the farm. Now when us old girls are speaking to women under 35 they have no understanding of what came before. They sense something is wrong, but they don't know what it is or how to address it. And when it gets uncomfortable they don't want to deal with it, and they revert back to the basic picture of women... They don't take agency, and worse, they don't even seem to want it.”

Yet we need policy and leadership now as much as we ever did. A 2018 Global Women in Agriculture study by Corteva AgriScience indicates that while 91 per cent of Canadian women are proud of the work they do in the industry, “pride does not necessarily translate into happiness. Financial insecurity and other factors, especially the experience of gender inequality, negatively impact the happiness of female farmers in every country we studied.” In fact 61 per cent of Canadian women agreed with the statement that “gender discrimination is an issue in the agriculture industry.”

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“We have to ask those questions,” says Kelly. “It’s not just good agricultural practice, it’s good business practice... you have to set out the roles like the best companies do.”

Krysta Harden headed the Corteva study in her previous job as a vice-president with DuPont. As women in agriculture go, Harden has pretty much reached the peak, serving in the Obama administration as U.S. deputy secretary of agriculture from 2013 to 2016, then the role with DuPont, and currently as executive vice-president of global environmental strategy with Dairy Management Inc.

The ballooning number of women with education in agriculture is translating into growing acceptance of women in primary production in the United States, but “rural areas are limited in career options,” Harden says. “There is not as much opportunity for women to use their education... If they have intentions to go back to the farm they need to prepare for how they will fulfill their career needs on the farm and what that might look like.”

To attract women back to the farm, Harden suggests a holistic approach. “Farming is a family business, so you have to address all the needs of families including child care and division of labour,” she says. Rural transportation is another issue as geographic isolation leaves farm families with few alternatives but to have one adult be “taxi” driver, excluding them from other roles on the farm operation.

“No one group is responsible to make these things happen,” Harden says. “It’s so easy to say this is not my issue, it’s not something I do. But we don’t have the luxury of doing that anymore. We can’t delegate this. We have to join forces... Strong voices that are bi-partisan are required. People want to see things as black and white but I always look for the grey... we have to look for the levelers.”

Jean Harrington sees polarization in Canada as well. SWAN became political and then became irrelevant, she says with a touch of regret, arguing women in agriculture need to seek broad-based change. “And change means someone will lose their advantage, and so they will circle the wagons for their self-interest. We need bigger picture thinkers.”

But much like the rest of modern society and politics, Harrington thinks leadership in agriculture has become too much about self-interest, with people very single-minded in what they want out of an organization. And that does nothing for communities who need representation that is broad-based and inclusive.

Women are not a homogenous group, and the only way to achieve the larger goals for women in agriculture is to step back from ideological positions and under-

stand these are women's issues generally. "Defend one step further back and you are defending women's rights," says Harrington.

If she's right, who is up to that challenge? Who among us can run the gauntlet of finding their aptitudes and interests fulfilled on the farm, avoid ideology or self-interest in leadership roles, and still maintain the right to enjoy a manicure and good glass of wine?

HIGH HEELS AND CANOLA FIELDS

Perhaps Lesley Kelly is the exception. Or the new rule. A woman who has actively carved out her role on the farm, Kelly engages and organizes with other women in farm groups, and is, at time of writing, running for the board of the Saskatchewan Wheat Development Commission.

With post-secondary education in marketing and accounting, Kelly has worked in the corporate agriculture financing and marketing sectors. At 36, she and her husband Matt have two young children and now farm with her dad and brother near Watrous, Sask., where Evergreen Wood Creek Farm is a seed growing operation running 6,500 acres of canola, wheat, durum, lentils, oats and barley.

Kelly writes a popular blog, High Heels and Canola Fields, where she presents well-researched posts that try to bridge the knowledge gap between those who make food and those who consume it. She is also a founder of Do More Ag, a not-for-profit organization focusing on mental health in agriculture, and her full-time role on the farm is in human resource management, communications, team building, marketing, accounting, and "support person to everyone."

It is an advantage that her background fits with her desired role on the operation. Her corporate experience taught her the value of working with the strengths of each person, and how to create a positive and open culture on the farm.

"We are not afraid to have those difficult conversations," she says. "We are five individuals who don't necessarily think alike and don't want the same things. We are also vocal and open about our mental health. If you let things fester it doesn't work. We see it and talk about it in a 'moving forward' kind of way... We used to be passive-aggressive and hold onto it until things blew up. Now we ask why and explain why it was a problem... We can then make adjustments to our expectations, and compromise. We express ourselves to one another. We try to know each other's world."

Part of their farm's success is recognizing the different personal goals of the individuals involved. Kelly uses the example of meal preparation. Her mother made all the meals because she felt sharing meals brought everyone together, and provided an opportunity to slow down a moment and reflect. But when Kelly came along she didn't want the job.

"It seems like a small thing," Kelly says. "But we have to be aware of expectations and what else is going on in people's lives. But also what do each of us WANT to be doing. I didn't want that role and I didn't think it should be mine. Meals are important but I feel I can help the farm in other ways that are best suited to my skills and passions."

Perhaps her ability to stake a claim and refuse traditional roles comes from the fact this is her family farm. It was Matt who joined. And Kelly says he felt the same kind of anxiety many women feel around that, the need to prove himself and to work super hard to show his commitment. A role reversal if you like.

"There is a sprinkling of gender aspect in all of this," Kelly says. "It depends on what the person wants their role to look like. In agriculture there is often still the view that if you're not an operator, then you're not

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a real farmer... And if you come from the outside it's harder to feel ownership or partnership. People have to discuss what that means to each person because our intrinsic values are so different. We have to ask those questions. It's not just good farm practice but good business practice. And it's not gender specific," she says. "You have to set out roles like the best companies do."

Kelly loves the blend of personal and professional she's achieved on the farm. She's also practical. The couple hires full-time child care, and she sounds incredulous that people don't think it's a necessity, or that some still believe the woman is supposed to do it all because the business is run from home.

"We wouldn't expect a restaurant owner to have their kids around all the time and deal with their

needs while running a restaurant. They'd have child care, so why is my situation any different?"

Bringing the same practical arguments to the industry, Kelly says she's running for a director position with Sask Wheat because "I'm a young farmer and want to be part of solutions that help make the industry stronger. Diversity on boards can help strengthen them and what I offer through my experience and background in marketing, communications, and value-add can help achieve this. I want to help foster an industry rich in female leadership that empowers future generations to do the same."

If Lesley Kelly is the new archetype of Canadian farm women, Jean Harrington will likely be pleased. But we'll need a lot more women willing to make the leap from networking to action if we hope to turn aspirational talk and recommendations coming out of conferences and studies into real policy changes, and create a cultural shift so women in agriculture are no longer the exception but the norm. And so we are no longer having this conversation.