

More Than Farmers 01-28-2020

More than Farmers

Women in Agriculture

By Jodi DeHate

Missaukee Conservation District

Women have always been involved in farming, but women are doing more than just helping. Personally, I've never seen being a woman in a male dominated field like agriculture as a deterrent. Growing up on a dairy farm may have taught me to just keep plowing through or maybe that was my natural born stubbornness that was shining through. This February 11, Wexford – Missaukee Career Technical Center is holding a “Careers for Women Conference” during which I'll be speaking to high school girls about working in a non-traditional field.

Just is the new dirty word

Agriculture is a non-traditional field proven by viewing the statistics from United States Department of Agriculture; only 36% of all farmers and ranchers are female and 56% of all farms have at least one female decision maker. These numbers aren't shocking by any means. Many women on farms tend to think of themselves as “just a farm wife”. They are definitely more than “just”.

These women typically do the bookwork, which means the financial end and recordkeeping on the farm. Many also fill in on the farm as the ultimate multitaskers - milking when someone doesn't show up, helping calve, or driving tractor or truck when more hands are needed. Not to mention, raising the kids, sometimes pretty single handedly, depending on the season. More women are in charge of traditionally male dominated aspects of the farm such as decisions on fertility related to both animals and crops, handling of employees, or maintenance of machinery.

Don't have to be a farmer

But being in agriculture doesn't mean a woman has to be a farmer. There are over 20,000 various jobs in agriculture that are unfulfilled each year. What kind of jobs? According AgGrad.com these are the top 7 job categories:

- Ag retail sales--working with farmers to help them make good decisions on fertilizer, equipment, seed, or anything they might need on the farm.
- Agribusiness operations manager--people could manage grain elevators, greenhouses, or feedlots.
- Custom operator/Pest Control--someone that applies fertilizer or crop protection products to crops.
- Farm Manager--as farms get bigger there needs to be more people helping the farm owners manage various aspects of the farm.
- Agriculture Financing and accounting-- Ag financing and accounting are a much different beast than other types of businesses.

- Agriculture Technician--defined as people that may work for the Natural Resource Conservation Service, a Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) Technician such as myself, or an agronomist that helps farmers. There's so many Ag related careers that these are just the tip of the iceberg.

Work to be done

As in all careers, but especially in male dominated ones, sexism can be an issue. Personally, I've only ever experienced sexism minimally in what I do daily or even when I was working on the farm with my parents. My Grandpa Eisenga was one that just told me "you can do it" when someone else in the family said, "I don't think you can". Apparently he was an equal opportunity kind of guy when it came to farm work. But that isn't the case everywhere. Friends in Twitter land have confided that they've been subject to sexual harassment and overt sexism in their jobs. Thankfully, there's more people in leadership that just don't sweep these allegations under the rug. There have been some very real consequences for men that think sexual harassment or overt, unwanted sexual advances are okay.

On the flip side, I've experienced more judgmental women online in a women in ag Facebook group when sharing a bad experience I did happen to have. My job is meeting farmers at the farm and spending a couple of hours with them on the farm. I've spent that time in the cab of a truck, tractor, or in the farm office or house alone with the farmer. I've been told I need to not wear makeup, take my husband along, to wear turtlenecks, and wear loose slacks! These comments came from other women!

What are agribusinesses doing to address these issues? Taking survey and being aware and open to problems within the company is the first step. Making sure policies are in place to protect women fairly is another. Making sure that women can be heard and taken seriously is a big step in the right direction.

Words of encouragement

Some very wise women I've connected with have said:

"Mine would be to share that we are encouraged to look a certain way, talk and be a certain way. So follow YOUR passions. Trust your gut. If you don't know what that is....try. Learn. Fall down and get back up. Do the things that make you happy." @lesleyraykelly

"One woman leader in my company told me something that's stuck: women tend to look at job descriptions and check off all the things they can't do (ultimately not applying), while men tend to read a job description and check off the things they can do (applying anyway.)" @hannahaggie2014

Most people are here to support you in your journey in agriculture. Finding a mentor can be crucial. Connect with other women that are farmers or in agribusiness. Great connections can be made within Michigan Farm Bureau or on Twitter or talking to women at church. Whatever it is, find your group. We are in this together!

Jodi DeHate is Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program Technician for Missaukee, Wexford, Kalkaska, and Crawford counties. She can be reached at jodi.dehate@macd.org or at the Missaukee Conservation District 231.839.7193.



223 Jean Venema, Jodi's mom, helping combine grain. Bruce & Nels Eisenga also pictured.

Photo credit Jake Eisenga.



223 – Jean Venema helping out with cutting wood. Bruce and Jake Eisenga also pictured.

Photo credit Jo Eisenga



223 Benita Meekhof, Farm Service Agency County Executive Director of the Cadillac and Scottville offices.

Photo Credit Dennis Meekhof



223 Katy Eggle and niece, Maddi. Katy is a beef farmer and County Administrative Manager for Missaukee, Wexford, and Benzie – Manistee County Farm Bureaus.

Photo credit David Eggle