

Dear Colleagues,

From the soil, to my hands and through my heart and head, I thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important conversation! I am participating in this panel as a beginning woman farmer and farm owner of five years and in support of the WFO Women's Committee which I am member of representing the National Farmers Union in the U.S.

The following are a few broad comments regarding questions posed from Ms. Neurenberg. As the discussion unfolds, I look forward to learning where and how I might build on comments and share these highlights with other women farmers and groups I am engaged with back home and around the world. I mostly view my role in this conversation as a delegate on behalf of National Farmers Union and the WFO Women's Committee, though when relevant, I will weave in perspectives and programs that I have personally been involved with for my farm both locally and globally that have been help for me in my professional growth.

**What are some of the key challenges women and youth in agriculture are facing?**

The challenges I would hone in on are land, market access, and discrimination (whether in markets or with accessing credit, equitable pay).

Lack of access to land is a core underlying issue especially for new and beginning farmers. This often is a result of difficulties in accessing the finances to buy or rent land as part of the farm business and in some parts of the world, women not being recognized or allowed to own land. For example, in the U.S. land may be available but many beginning farmers lack the cash or access to credit. The 2014 Farm Bill in the U.S. Includes many programs and gives USDA additional tools to help support, train, and provide technical assistance to new farmers and women farmers. Whether it's through tax incentives to help landowner to sell their farmland to a young farmer, or creating 'farm – centric' urban and suburban subdivisions.

I know land ownership, access, and tenure are a huge hurdles for many throughout the world and I look forward to learning how we might collectively address this challenge.

I am personally lucky in that I have access to land. It was inherited through the family, though the saying 'land rich, cash poor' is close to home for me as we slowly grow our farm business. I also think access to capital and non-exploitation of women/youth in the marketplace is a challenge that needs to be addressed.

For example, consolidation in the marketplace is a huge hurdle. In the U.S. when four firms control more than 40% of a market it is non-competitive. By the numbers, four companies control: 82% of beef packing industry, 85% of soybean processing, 63% of pork packing, 53% of broiler chicken processing (source University of Missouri – Columbia, 2012).

The upside is that many women and youth farmers are engaged in diversified production and selling direct to customers, thus able to capture a greater market share and avoiding some of the volatilities associated with commodity markets. Also, focus is on cooperative business model, working with other growers to prepare and add value to products, and pooling resources and product to reach markets and services that are otherwise hard to reach for small-holder farmers when operating individually. However, food price points and margins are tight, even through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model that we use on our farm for our fruits and vegetables, and overall net income often falls short for farming to cover cost of living expenses and health care. As a result, farmers work off farm,

sometimes holding multiple jobs to make a go, myself included. I think this is tied, in part, to economics of labor and where/how subsidies are paid out.

A third issue is around discrimination in general that women farmers face globally and which we still struggle with in the U.S. I'm not sure where the status of the Claims settlement is or how many women farmers participated, but women qualify under many SDA/Socially Disadvantaged farmer USDA definitions. I think that NGO's and farmer organizations can support women in connecting beginning women farmers with the FSA loan programs that have priority status for SDA/women farmer groups.

**Share any programs and initiatives you are leading/participating that are helping to strengthen the role of women and youth in agriculture.**

I have been fortunate to be able to participate in programs both in my backyard at my farm in Wisconsin and throughout the world in places such as Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Senegal, Zambia, and Argentina. I wanted to share a few programs that have impacted my ability as well as other farmers' to gain ground and sustainably grow our farm businesses. I hope that wherever you are in the world and wherever you might sit on the agricultural value chain, you can tease out common threads that can be applied, tweaked and adapted to your local communities.

**Locally (Wisconsin)**

[The Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship Program in Wisconsin](#) that pairs beginning farmers with experienced farmers, sometimes with the goal of eventual farm transfer between the two is a bright spot.

**Theme:** The program provides a slow transfer in equity from mentor farmer to apprentice.

[Rural Women's Project – In Her Boots Program](#)

**Theme:** I wanted to emphasize the importance of the peer-network model in women-in-ag training and I think the In Her Boots project is a great example of this. The workshops are based on the idea that women farmers learn best from each other. The Women, Food & Agriculture Network/WFAN programming models this principle too. Workshops rotate where you meet (opportunity to visit other farms).

**National/Regional (U.S./North America):**

[Beginning Farmers Institute \(BFI\) Program through National Farmers Union Women's Conference/Annie's Project](#)

**Themes:** For the BFI – Beginning Farmers from all types of farms representing different regions in the U.S. Able to gather and focus on business planning, risk management. Small-group (7 – 9 participants). Combines meetings/discussions with farm visits that highlight success stories. Engages beginning farmers in shaping agenda and offers opportunities for program 'graduates' to help lead a session for next cohort. Respects diversity/differences of opinion and as a result able to build consensus and find common threads.

**Globally:**

[World Farmer Organization Women's Committee - Farmer to Farmer \(F2F\)](#)

[University of Wisconsin Global Health Partnership Model](#) – working with women farmers, Public Health and Physicians in WI and Ethiopia to support market access to sweet potatoes – broader themes of better access to water/irrigation and markets, building networks and relationships across sectors.

**Themes:**

With the WFO Women's Committee – women farmers serve as advocates/spokespeople and bridge builders in helping communicate success stories, making sure that women farmers have a voice at the decision making table where international agriculture policy and trade decisions are made. Also, the committee serves as a learning community where we can share case studies and success stories with other farmers in the world. I know there are other WFO Women's committee members participating with this forum and can weigh in on the value of this committee as well.

With F2F the on the ground emphasis is on peer to peer learning and matching volunteers with interests/skill sets of host country and project need.

With independent delegations I have done at our farm and in Central America, visiting farms and learning/experiencing production, whether it's coffee, mangoes or currants, and all the steps that go into processing from root to table is really eye opening for eaters.

With the Global Health Partnership - Twinning partnerships built between host organizations, farmers, and local community, as a result can come full circle in exchanging knowledge, ideas, networks/access to markets such as sweet potatoes.

What is evidenced in all of the programs mentioned is that the people the programs are meant to serve (women and beginning farmers) are involved in some capacity with shaping the project and program itself. If we want to support women and beginning farmers, then we need to offer opportunities for them to take leadership, shape the solutions and outcomes of these programs.

**I would be interested in learning success stories with programs that support economic development for farmers and their communities and what the common themes are to ensure success and that the funds actually get to where they are intended.**

**What measures can family farmers' organizations, governments, development organizations, the private sector take to ensure empowerment and equal rights of youth and women in agriculture?**

This is a great question! I will do my best to summarize a few thoughts that come to the forefront:

**Technical Support and Business Development (esp around helping access land/credit, markets):**

As a farmer, I have witnessed well-intentioned experts and scientists deliver 'best practices and technologies' to our farm and farmer networks without an understanding of culture or practical applications to field or farm systems. For women, I think we generally tend to process and learn in community, our scale is often smaller and diversified (at least for starting out). On our farm we look to other farmers for perspectives and advice as well as engaging expert knowledge. I think it's really important to create space for both farmer to farmer interaction (peer to peer network model in programs mentioned above), and opportunities for farmers to access expert advise.

Without their representation and input in the process, well intentioned programs will fall short in delivery and sometimes create unintended consequences/negative impacts. My observation is that this has been the case when it comes to technical expertise and access to inputs such as seeds and fertilizers. I observed this in my experiences working with farmers through the farmer to farmer program and farm visits around the world. I do think we need to take an honest look at how technical support programs are created, delivered and who benefits. Companies and organizations which provide technical support and products such as seeds and fertilizers can do a myriad of research and good will in the world, and

perhaps their development funds could be geared toward participatory plant breeding efforts, access to seeds and technical expertise that is combined with appropriate training/implementation to ensure optimal use and above all engages with women and youth in asking what is needed and how to work together toward finding solutions.

[I look forward to learning what others have done when it comes to technical training/support for women and youth farmers.](#)

For beginning and youth farmers, I think a farm incubator model is a great way for beginning farmers to not have to front all the capital costs in tools/equipment, and have a group of peers and mentor farmers available as they get started. This is a role that public/private partnerships can play in helping fund the land and educational support of incubators.

The [USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program](#) has funded incubator models and you learn more on their website.

**Process Measures – How you do it is what you get:** I also think there needs to be a focus on process when it comes to program/policy creation, delivery, and follow – up.

To better understand the inequities in the food system and why women and youth disproportionately feel the impact, the work to change inequities must include people who have faced these in finding solutions. For starters ask women and youth (whether it's through writing, listening sessions, radio, social media, or artwork, video, etc.), how they are/have been disempowered.

I think women and youth must be part of the discussion, work in partnership with groups, NGO's etc. when it comes to creating programs and policies. I think this can be done anywhere in the world, though it takes commitment and for those with positional power/leadership to extend the invitation to engage with women/youth, those who they are hoping to serve. For example, invite and include women and youth as spokespeople for the programs, share space next time you host a workshop, conference or roundtable, to include women and youth as panelists, co-instructors or facilitators.

A few examples of program/process models for creating welcoming, participatory spaces for women/youth to co-create policies/programs and be involved as both learners and leaders that I have had the opportunity to engage with directly, are as follows:

**Locally (Wisconsin)** – Wisconsin Farmers Union – Emerging Leaders Program. Supports leadership development of farmers in general, including women and beginning farmers. Child care is provided.

While not directly related to agriculture, the [UW MANIAC program](#) (Madison Area Network for Innovation and Collaboration) is an excellent example of a learning community and I have used many tools, ideas in projects and events that I've implemented on my farm. The group has also led to finding new consulting projects and networking with other food related businesses.

**National/Regional (U.S./North America)** – [Beginning Farmer Institute with National Farmers Union](#)  
Iowa's Value Chain Partnership

**Globally:** My participation with the [WFO Women's Committee](#) and the WFO in general, is a great example of farmers (women/youth) working and gathering with experts and learning from people from all over the world who may have very different perspectives and opinions.

Woven into all these programs and initiatives, are women/youth as spokespeople, helping shape the agenda *{and the ability to engage with experts in the field of interest whether it is co-op development or writing a business plan}*. Minimal lecture and more time for discussion/activities or better still, hosting at a farm and/or a relaxing space. Using tools such as story-telling, providing a handful of ways for people to engage in the process (ex: individual writing/interviews, group listening sessions/discussions, video/social media) and being sure to include food/water and/or other ways to wake up the senses. Also, having a facilitator/host – someone who provides a structural anchor-is key and helps with follow-up to keep the pace. Having multiple ways for people to engage in finding solutions is also important.

I've learned a lot from [Art of Hosting](#) workshops, [Appreciative Inquiry](#), and [Open Space Technology](#)

**I know there are other programs/tools for engagement that others are working on and toward and I look forward to learning more of your comments in this forum.**

**I would also love to learn ways we can bridge-build with men, make allies in supporting women's equity that are to the benefit of all.** My sense is that men are very open and wanting to engage in supporting women farmers, though in practice it is still psychologically/subconsciously difficult to share space, make room for people and ideas that may be different from their own and in some cases men (and women) are unwilling to give up or share positional power.

If you have stayed with my comments this long you understand that brevity was never a strongpoint of mine and that I love farming, I love fruit, and I'd love to hear from you.

Thank you very much for your time and convening the space for this important discussion. I look forward to learning more as the conversation unfolds.

With appreciation,  
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