Women in Agriculture Worldwide

Over the past two decades, existing documentation of women in the agricultural sector has surveyed topics such as agricultural restructuring and land reform, international trade agreements and food trade, land ownership and rural development and rural feminisms. Many studies have focused on either the high-income countries of the global North or the low-income countries of the global South. This separation suggests that the North has little to learn from the South, or that there is little shared commonality across the global dividing line.

Fletcher and Kubik cross this political, economic, and ideological division by drawing together authors from 5 continents. They discuss the situation for women in agriculture in 13 countries worldwide, with two chapters that cover international contexts. The authors blur the boundaries between academic and organizational authors and their contributors include university-based researchers, gender experts, development consultants, and staff of agricultural research centers and international organizations (i.e., Oxfam, the United Nations World Food Program). The common thread connecting these diverse authors is an emphasis on practical and concrete solutions to address the challenges, such as lack of access to resources and infrastructure, lack of household decision-making power, and gender biases in policymaking and leadership, still faced by women in agriculture around the world. Ongoing issues in climate change will exasperate many of these issues and several chapters also address environment and sustainability.

This book is of great interest to readers in the areas of gender studies, agriculture, policy studies, environmental studies, development and international studies.

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Women and Sustainable Business

1. Women in Agriculture Worldwide
Key issues and practical approaches
Edited by Amber J. Fletcher and Wendee Kubik
Women in Agriculture Worldwide
Key issues and practical approaches

Edited by
Amber J. Fletcher and Wendee Kubik
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United States of America

15 Building power through community
Women creating and theorizing change

Angie Carter, Betty Wells, Ashley Hand, and Jessica Soulis

Introduction
The Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) originated in 1994 in Iowa, United States, in response to systemic problems in the food and agricultural sector, including the absence of women’s voices. Since then, we have grown to become a nationally recognized non-profit organization serving women in sustainable agriculture while remaining rooted in an area of the United States dominated by mainstream, patriarchal agriculture. This chapter focuses on three core WFAN programs that engage creative, alternative methods of learning to build community among women and to build a new community-focused agricultural vision. Yet, the actualization of women’s empowerment within agriculture remains challenged locally and unrealized culturally. As researchers and practitioners involved with WFAN, we have a unique contribution to make to the story of agriculture. In this chapter we draw from our experiences with WFAN programs and as members of the WFAN board to focus on these key questions: In what ways do incremental gains for women support or subvert existing power structures? How does WFAN continue to elevate women and remain gender-focused in efforts to achieve systemic change? We explore these questions in the context of three WFAN programs and hope to offer insight into efforts beyond the Midwestern United States.

WFAN’s ecofeminist history
WFAN was founded in Iowa, United States, following the mobilization of women seeking to address concerns about systemic problems in agriculture and rural communities. While the negative consequences of industrial agriculture upon the environment, local knowledge, and local people (in particular, women and children) are well documented (Mies and Shiva 1993; Sachs 1996), the same patriarchal capitalist structures that privilege profit over environmental and social justice in industrial agriculture also exist in sustainable agriculture (Allen 2004; Sachs 1996). WFAN was born of a cultural context of male dominance and hegemony, and a cultural “conspiracy of courtesy” that also served to silence women. WFAN’s mission, set in 1998 – “to link and amplify women’s voices on issues of food systems, sustainable...
A. Carter, B. Wells, A. Hand, and J. Soulis

WFAN’s seeds were planted in 1994 in processes leading to the United Nations Fourth World Women’s Conference in Beijing. To prepare input for the Women’s Conference, Julia Anderson and Betty Wells convened with other Iowa women in Grinnell, Iowa, to gather data on rural women’s access to land, credit, and decision-making structures to inform a workshop for a conference in Iowa City. At this conference, Anderson and Wells were joined by presenters Pat Boddy, Denise O’Brien, and Cindy Fletcher, with Bev Everett recording and Dorothy Paul reporting. Despite a growing international literature on women in development and agriculture, we had discovered scant information on rural and agricultural women in the US in general, and Iowa in particular (although we did find data on women’s ownership of farmland that was to fuel considerable future programming). Also in 1994, Iowa’s Denise O’Brien and Kathy Lawrence of The National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture formed a Women, Food and Agriculture working group in preparation for Beijing to remedy the neglect of food and agricultural issues. We would later append the word “network” to this name upon the founding of WFAN in 1997.

The organizational goals WFAN’s feminist founding members adopted in March 1998 flew in the face of common conjecture at the time that there were no rural feminists, much less feminist farmers. A selection of these goals, germane to the focus of this paper, include:

- advocating change by exploring alternatives and challenging the globalization of economies, cultures of domination and institutionalized discrimination;
- insisting on social and ecological justice for current and future human and non-human communities;
- providing experiential education on economics and environment that articulates a holistic view of agriculture, instills a sense of place and draws forward useful experiences from the past;
- creating networks that support communities who strive for sustainability; providing safe places for self-expression; and respecting the spirituality of the land and people.

Challenging “cultures of domination” affirms that our task is not only about women (although we privilege women). Patriarchal domination cannot be eradicated while racism and other forms of group oppression stay intact, because these systems share an ideological foundation: “feminism must exist apart from and as part of the larger struggle to eradicate all forms of domination” (hooks 1989, 22). Ecofeminists further the complexity of the feminist notion of intersectionality by integrating nature “as a fourth category of analysis in an extended feminist theory which employs a race,
class and gender analysis” (Plumwood 1993, 1–2). An ecofeminist framework helps us draw connections between systemic agriculture and rural problems and the patriarchal and corporate domination of rural and agricultural institutions and organizations. The need is urgent, so we insist on justice, while recognizing that we must work across organizations for both social justice and sustainability. WFAN is committed to holistic, experiential learning that is respectful of past and place, providing safe spaces, and valuing spirituality.

WFAN has evolved from an informal network to become a legally sanctioned 501(c)(3) non-profit organization (Code of Federal Regulations, title 10, sec 501.15) in 2011, with paid staff and funded projects. Our continued relevance is underscored by the persistence of gendered systemic problems in agriculture, and our vitality by the entry of a new generation of organizational leadership. Against this historical backdrop, we shift focus to three programs that align with the intent of the founders to challenge the status quo in agricultural institutions.

Building community: WFAN’s programs

WFAN’s programs emerged from the need to address intransigent problems associated with industrial agriculture and an institutional context that has largely excluded women. They include:

• Women Caring for the Land (WCL): reaching women farmland owners for increased conservation/land stewardship through peer-to-peer learning circles and field visits;
• Harvesting our Potential (HOP): supporting experienced, beginning, and aspiring women farmers through a mentor/mentee partnership program;
• Plate to Politics (P2P): increasing women’s political participation in food systems through political advocacy and leadership training.

Our work with woman farmland owners started in 2001, with participatory research with a group of women farmland owners in Cass County, Iowa (Wells 2004). This pilot project gave birth to two successor programs: Women Caring for the Land (WCL), which we write about in this chapter, and Women, Land and Legacy, which also continues to this day in partnership with other organizations. The first of several projects matching experienced women farmers in mentoring relationships with aspiring and beginning women farmers began in 2000, predating what we now call Harvesting Our Potential (HOP). As the WCL and HOP programs are contemporaneous and longer standing, we describe, compare, and contrast them first. We then turn attention to the third and newest program, Plate to Politics (P2P). We will also analyze how these programs support or challenge existing power structures and conclude with a discussion of how our experience informs our elevation of women and gender-focused programs to achieve systemic change.
Program 1. Women Caring for the Land (WCL)

The magnitude of women's farmland ownership – women own or co-own 47 percent of farmland in Iowa and rent their farmland at higher rates than their counterparts (Duffy and Johanns 2014) – brought our efforts to the attention of state and national agricultural agencies and likely increased our funding opportunities. Women Caring for the Land (WCL) works to provide information and resources directly to women farmland owners. WCL operates from a respectful, asset-based (rather than a deficit or remedial) model to build on what women know instead of focusing on what they do not know. This approach focuses on respecting and reaching out to women where they are. We understand that while prescribed gender expectations have limited some women's involvement in mainstream production agriculture, these women acquired knowledge in socially acceptable realms and possess an abundant stock of tacit knowledge.

WCL features six-hour meetings called learning circles for women who own land but may or may not be actively involved in making farm management decisions, especially related to conservation. These learning circles are conversational, peer-to-peer gatherings facilitated by WFAN-affiliated women resource conservationists. Women from conservation agencies are invited to attend for part of the day as an antidote to the often male-dominated conservation offices. Women share their stories, learn about local conservation programs, and visit conservation sites on neighboring farms, shared experiences which enhance appreciation for ecological complexity and diversity. Women learn about programs/meetings offered by partnering organizations covering topics such as setting appropriate rent prices, getting leases (including with conservation provisions) in writing (preferably for multiple years), and estate planning for passing their land to heirs. Women are also encouraged to discuss their experiences with agricultural conservation with their legislators who could act to improve institutional effectiveness in helping women.

WCL features educational materials that show women in photos and use the bright colors that many women say that they prefer. Eells (2010) has tested WCL curriculum innovations that draw on experiences that may be more familiar to women, such as the ingredients and processes used in cooking or the fabrics used in sewing or quilting, with the goal to determine how readily recognition of shapes, textures, and patterns from different contexts might be transferred to the landscape. One of the activities in the curriculum asks women to collaboratively create farmscapes of their dream farms (Figure 15.1), an activity that inspires conversations about both changes on the landscape and visions for the futures of their farms.

WCL is unique in the United States for its focus on agricultural conservation for women non-operator landowners. Evaluations of the outcomes of these single-day meetings show that women leave the learning circles and take action to improve conservation on their land. Surveys of women who have attended WCL learning circles show that 50–60 percent have taken
farmland-related conservation action. Eells and Soulis (2014) reviewed literature related to women landowners and found that the lack of differentiation between men and women operators and owners in census or survey studies leaves us knowing little about the interests and values of women farmland owners. By creating space for women farmland owners to connect and share experiences, WCL fosters future interaction and conservation actions, and increases their visibility to researchers, policy makers, and conservation professionals.

**Program 2. Harvesting Our Potential (HOP)**

WFAN programs to develop skills, confidence, and community among beginning or aspiring women farmers by matching them with experienced women farmers date to 2000. The current version of this program, Harvesting Our Potential (HOP), provides stipends to mentors and mentees in a variety of mentorship arrangements. The mentees and mentors in the HOP program are exclusively women engaged in non-industrial agriculture (e.g., fruit and vegetable farmers, CSA owners, or pasture-raised livestock farmers). An award of a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program grant in 2012 scaled
up our efforts to reach the growing number of women exploring careers in small-scale, diversified agriculture in states dominated by conventional agriculture. HOP complements existing beginning farmer programming in the upper Midwest by adding on-farm mentoring and business planning designed and delivered by women, for women. Many women benefit from and prefer being mentored by another woman, yet few if any programs build explicitly on this preference. HOP does so, while also emphasizing methods and approaches congruent with our goals and feminist roots, such as peer-to-peer learning.

HOP consists of three program components – on-farm mentoring (with training), business training, and structured networking – consistent with an appreciative inquiry approach, which engages participants and partners in improving the program as it unfolds. At participants’ request, we have adjusted our program to allow successful mentor–mentee matches to continue in a second year. Although a trade-off in terms of numbers of new women served, especially given that our target numbers are small compared to many other beginning farmer programs, this change reflects our growing appreciation that an eight-week experience does not a farmer make (although it may be adequate for learning that one does not want to be a farmer, which we count as a successful program outcome). A typical aspiring/beginning farmer may end her menteeship with more questions than when she started. A partnership that works, whether due to complementary skills, compatible personalities, or work ethic, is a solid foundation on which to build for the next season.

Mentor training has evolved to reflect increased appreciation of reciprocal learning, and blurred distinction between mentee and mentor. We continue to emphasize expectations, legalities, and goal setting and to use examples from the farms of participating mentors to ground the discussion of varied farm calendars and approaches to lesson planning. We have added a learning circles component for aspiring farmers, building on the success of this approach in WCL. For the business component, we have begun a new collaboration in Iowa with Iowa State University Extension’s “Annie’s Project,” expanding their audience beyond women partners in more conventional agriculture operations.

What do these programs have in common? What generic issues cross the programs?

WCL and HOP are complementary, but the audiences are distinct. WCL participants are primarily women whose land is farmed using conventional agricultural practices and who do not identify as organic or sustainable farmers – in fact, many do not identify as farmers at all. They have often been excluded from or have not engaged in traditional agricultural knowledge-sharing networks. Further, while many are leaders within their families or communities, and identify many gender-based challenges in
their relationships with tenants or in regards to their management of their farmland, few would identify as feminist. Although many of the women landowners depend upon income derived from renting land and are not necessarily wealthy, generally they would have assets that many beginning or aspiring farmers lack, notably land. WCL has garnered broad support and recognition, including the Governor’s Environmental Excellence Award for WFAN’s work with women farmland owners and conservation education. 3

HOP participants align more with an ecological, Leopoldian land-as-community (as opposed to land-as-commodity) conception of agriculture. 4 The farms and farmers that affiliate with WFAN tend to be small-scale, diversified operations, sometimes organic or using largely organic practices. Many focus on fruits and vegetables or other niche products. Their agricultural enterprises are sometimes referred to as small market or value-added. HOP participants are more active in WFAN, attending conferences, serving on the board, serving as leaders in local and national level agricultural and food advocacy organizations, and are more likely to identify as feminist.

Consistent with WFAN goals, both programs employ alternative methods of outreach. 5 We feature learning circles in both WCL and HOP programming, an approach which gives voice to women by fostering safe or privileged spaces and by building their confidence to enter more public spaces.

We next turn attention to the P2P, the third program of focus, which is the most recent addition to WFAN’s program portfolio.

**Program 3. Plate to Politics (P2P)**

Thirty women food-systems advocates from across the country convened at the Wingspread Center in Racine, Wisconsin, for the Cultivate 2012 summit focused on how the growth of women in farmers’ markets, organic sales, community gardens, and the farm to school movement could launch a larger initiative to increase the number of women in politics. P2P emerged from this program as a joint effort among the now defunct White House Project, the MOSES Rural Women’s Project, and WFAN, and is now a WFAN program. 6 Through our experiences with HOP and WCL, we saw a need for training to assist women interested in entering into political leadership within their communities. P2P originated from our identified need to elevate the unique challenges to women in agriculture, assist in changing systemic constraints, and create opportunities for social change. P2P, and its focus on training women to be leaders in their communities, is unique to WFAN.

Of the WFAN programs, only P2P is overtly “political,” and that is only in terms of getting women to run for political office, not so much in terms of positions taken. P2P does not take positions on issues; rather, it prepares women to run for office in their communities with the idea that more women involved with politics will elevate women in agriculture and food systems work and help address the challenges they face.
This program is proving most challenging to fund. Small grants have funded webinars and trainings targeting rural women, but this funding has not been consistent. Engaging rural women in political leadership development is a challenge, and the P2P program has focused on building interactive opportunities through webinars to reach women where they are. Sessions at the annual WFAN conferences, the 2013 national Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference, and meetings of allied organizations, such as the Minnesota Farmers Union, have provided opportunities to engage agricultural women in networking and trainings related to running for office. Webinars are available on our website resource library and are accessible to the public at no cost. We remain hopeful that we might obtain a larger grant to fund more in-person interactions for women interested in political leadership.

Theorizing systemic change in sustainable agriculture

Both our WCL and HOP programs address practical more than strategic gender needs. As Moser (1993, 40) explains: “Practical gender needs are those that women identify in their socially accepted roles in society … [They] do not challenge the gender divisions of labour or women’s subordinate position in society, although rising out of them. Practical gender needs are a response to immediate perceived necessity, identified within a specific context.” Housing, water quantity and quality, health care, employment, and adequate food supply are examples of practical gender needs.

Moser (1993, 39) defines strategic gender needs as those women identify because of their subordinate position to men in their society. Strategic gender needs vary according to particular contexts. They relate to gender divisions of labor, power and control and may include such issues as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages and women’s control over their bodies. Meeting strategic gender needs helps women to achieve greater equality. It also changes existing roles and therefore challenges women’s subordinate position.

While a useful distinction, in practice the line between practical and strategic gender needs is often blurred. WCL and HOP both provide a practical potential foothold for beginning to address strategic gender needs. WCL challenges the historical position of women in agricultural conservation and seeks to build confidence and knowledge of conservation practices by bringing them together in peer-to-peer women-only learning circles. Similarly, HOP challenges the historical position of women in agriculture by connecting them with peers and mentors to share knowledge and experiences that may not be valued in industrial agricultural systems. In conversational gatherings and through mentor–mentee relationships, women give voice to
their dreams for their farms and farmland, learn about the existing “rules of the game” imposed by the policies of the institution of agriculture, and begin to deconstruct the social isolation associated with their historic roles in agriculture – all important for challenging current directions in agriculture and creating alternative paths.

These safe spaces give women the opportunity to discuss issues related to power – not an easy topic to broach in everyday conversation, but an important one, as gendered relations are often about power. As women reflect concretely on their unique contexts – where they live, the land they own, and their relationships to others – a window may open on how issues of land and gender play out on the ground. A safe group provides opportunities for more open discussion and to role-play conversations with tenants about conservation or with aging parents about transitioning the land.

Critique of such programs suggests that in creating space for the unique concerns and work of women in sustainable agriculture, these programs may remove discussion of these concerns from the mainstream (Shortall 2001). However, WFAN’s experience and success in these programs suggests that this space is paramount for women in agriculture to find and create community. We know an important first step is inviting women to participate in a program that values their experiences as women, but it is not enough (Wells and Eells 2011). We must move into longer-term shifts in agriculture at cultural levels to address deeper structural change:

\[\text{Participation without a change in power relations may simply reinforce the status quo, simply adding to the mobilization of bias the claim to a more ‘democratic’ face. The illusion of inclusion means not only that what emerges is treated as if it represents what ‘the people’ really want, but also that it gains a moral authority that becomes hard to challenge or question.}\]

\[(\text{Gaventa and Cornwall 2001, 75})\]

Among the first steps in addressing gender issues in agriculture may be creating space to acknowledge and discuss inequalities, to create a network to assist women in confronting or navigating the challenges or violence they face as they challenge the boundaries of the agricultural status quo. Hassanein (1997), who has studied sustainable agricultural women’s networks, reports that these spaces are important for exchanging informal and formal knowledge.

The women in the WCL program are the rightful decision makers for the land they own, and agricultural conservation services are meant to apply equally to all landowners, but an institutional ethnography (Smith 2004) conducted by Jean Eells (2008) uncovered gaps in services provided by the natural resource agency staff who form the conservation plans that qualify landowners for supplemental government funds for implementation. She concludes that the “institution” of agricultural conservation has, in a number of ways,
systematically excluded women farmland owners from active participation in programs.

Eiman Zein-Elabdin (1996, 941) challenges us to identify and understand “the actual institutions and processes that lead to gender-specific actions toward the environment and use of natural resources within different historical and cultural confines as opposed to undertaking a theoretical dissection of development, gender, and the environment.” An institutional perspective on gender illuminates its path dependence, economic and political significance, and resistance to change (929). Because institutions are culture-specific, the ways in which gender specification plays out “can only be understood within specific temporal and spatial contexts” (939). Placing the relation of women to the environment in context also illuminates issues of power and policy, (Zein-Elabdin 1996), unmasking power structures that tend to privilege men over women and political interests that block “gender-based redefinition of power relations and wealth distribution” (942) – all germane to the project of sustainability. We gain insight about the glue that holds the current system together, the very system we would wish to dismantle.

We acknowledge that creating programs specifically for women is not alone enough to transform agriculture as an institution. Simply adding women to traditional groups or championing women’s advances does not contest or overcome the challenges women face. One reason add women and stir (Bunch 1987, 140) rarely works is because it assumes that exclusion is the only issue. It does not question the dominant land-as-commodity view being presented or the information being conveyed, which come from a knowledge system that women had little to do with generating. It fails to question the size and fit of government-sponsored conservation programs and educational needs. If programs – educational and otherwise – adequately met women’s needs, women would already be at the table. We can address content shortcomings and gender inequities at the same time by bringing women into programs designed with their input and needs in mind, programs with a more inclusive land-as-community approach that embraces diversity and differences.

Add women and stir is also flawed because it ignores context. Putting matters into context requires attending to often unseen background, looking behind the practices. To attend to context is to attend to relationships, such as the complex dynamics of tenant–landowner relations, the specific, embodied experience, and the claims of particular people in particular situations. There comes a time to move out of the comfort zone, and toward an ecological agriculture, as Leopold (1949) advocated, to take the standpoint of what he referred to collectively as “the land,” to become citizen-members of the land community, to enlarge the ethical boundaries of community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals.

We applaud this position, but caution that undifferentiated citizens default to male. Elizabeth Ransom and Carmen Bain (2011), in an analysis of secondary data from international development projects, conclude that women lost ground when gender became the conceptual currency and projects came to
focus on gender rather than women. “Gender mainstreaming” has produced diminished material gains for women. We might heed this cautionary tale.

Decrying the snail’s pace of progress in conservation, Leopold (1949, 207) did not question the need for conservation education, but asked, “is it certain that only the volume of education needs stepping up? Is something lacking in the content as well?” Wells and Eells (2011) agree that education is not enough, and that things are also lacking in content, a related emphasis on land-as-community/community agriculture and ecological agricultural practices. They point out the obvious: that women have also been missing.

“Women need to be invited,” said Bev Everett in 1983 (Everett 1983, 69). Her call to engage more women in conservation was based partly in equity for women and partly in needed human qualities, the need for people with good judgment and people who hold values about resource stewardship. Her belief was that “women, more so than men, hold such holistic views of agriculture and want to express them” (1983, 69). While the qualities in short supply are not exclusive to women, the values connected to all-out production have had a masculine bent, and more feminine leaning values – caring, community, and family – have gotten short shrift.

**WFAN’s quilt in the making**

Karen Warren’s (2000) articulation of ecofeminist theory as quilting shines light on how WFAN and these three programs have developed, as well as our way forward. Several features of quilts, not the least that quilting is historically identified with women (68), make this metaphor apt. More so, “quilts are highly contextual; they grow out of and reflect specific historical, social, economic, and political influences” (Warren 2000, 67). They are forms of discourse; quilts “tell stories, record people’s lives, provide portraits of the quilters who make them, and often give shape and form to the experiences of those whose stories are not told in the literature discourse” (68). They preserve the histories of distinct cultural traditions.

Quilts can also raise issue awareness, as in the case of the AIDS Names Project quilts highlighted by Warren (2000, 66–67), and in our earlier example of the WCL program, in which farmland owners create quilt-like pieces from familiar materials and fabrics to portray their dream farmscapes, and which can be pieced together with those of their neighbors to inspire conversations about landscape-level changes. Quilts are aesthetic and increasingly appreciated as works of art: “exciting visually, with precise, varied, and vibrant designs, bold color combinations and exuberant displays of individual and community identities” (Warren 2000, 68). And, of course, quilts are quintessentially practical, as “comforters” (Warren 2000, 68) that provide warmth or even income for their makers.

We can see how the design of WFAN’s quilt has emerged from the diverse perspectives and experiences of its makers. Warren (2000) understands theory as a set of necessary, but not sufficient, conditions. Our mission and goals
form the border of WFAN’s quilt, framing our commitment to women, agricultural sustainability, social justice, and healthy, accessible community food systems. “[N]othing that is knowingly, intentionally, or consciously naturist, sexist, racist, or classist – or which maintains isms of domination – belongs on the quilt. Nor does anything that is not, in some way, about nonhuman nature or human-nature relationships” (Warren 2000, 67). These border conditions would align with ecofeminist quilters in a variety of different settings.

The patches are a different matter. Quilters in different historical, material and cultural contexts will construct different pieces. For this reason, we cannot know beforehand what the interior of the quilt will look like; we do not know enough to specify all the sufficient conditions for a quilt piece. We may find a piece from one time or setting now fails to satisfy the border condition that denies any ism of domination a place on the quilt. Our task is then to repair, replace, remove, or alter to preserve the value and usefulness of the quilt, building on the work of previous quilters, but reflecting new insights and perspectives (Warren 2000, 67). The pattern of the quilt is in process, not preordained.

The interior of WFAN’s quilt may also change in light of matters practical and strategic, such as funding streams, decisions about where to invest limited program resources, or evolving definitions of sustainable agriculture, diversity, inclusion and women’s identity. Chiappe and Flora (1998, 374) point to elements that may need a more prominent place on our quilt when they ask: “To what degree does the male derived paradigm leave out elements essential for the effective development of technology, policy, and education capable of facilitating a movement toward a more sustainable food system?” Other questions may prompt soul searching (and quilt mending) as to the depth of our commitment to social change as we stumble into new unthought-of isms or experience the full implications of challenges such as climate change for our modes of being in the world. The quilting will continue.

**Conclusion and lingering questions**

Our goal in this chapter is empirical and analytical, to describe and theorize change, in order to inform practice. Borrowing from Chris Cuomo (2003, 41), we define theory as “a form of knowledge-making that creates order, reifies and challenges power, and informs particular practical decisions and interactions.” Cuomo (2003, 53) reminds us also that:

> Theory is practice, and it informs and is shaped by myriad other practices, material conditions, and political realities … theory is no distanced knower, gazing upon reality from above and attempting a perfect sketch. As a form of interactive reflection, theory does aim to capture and convey, but those aims are never pure, disinterested, or only intellectual.

As feminist theorists often remind, there is nothing so practical as a good theory, but they fully understand the complexity of the feminist theoretical project.
Our experience is working with primarily white women in a Midwestern agricultural landscape dominated by row crop agriculture. While the majority of the world’s women farmers have very different experiences, the industrial agriculture of the Midwest is an important context in that it is used as a model for agricultural progress and exported to the developing world under the guise of agricultural development. Our hope is that sharing our lessons learned and continuing questions will inform agricultural systems intervention and change beyond this context. We draw upon our experience through these programs to ask: in what ways do our incremental gains as women support or subvert existing power structures? How do we continue to elevate women and remain gender-focused in our efforts to achieve systemic change?

We are not naïve about the challenges we face in both our larger ambitions of achieving sustainability or more modest realms of having a seat at the table. Resistance to change is deep; institutions do not give up power willingly. To achieve sustainability may require both the participation of women and the advancement of certain values. We can open and hold (learning) space, speak against patriarchal power in agriculture, call out and name hegemony, speak truth to power, and create community.

In participating in the creation of alternative spaces and exchanging needed skills and knowledge, participants in WFAN’s programs may begin to construct new narratives for their landscapes. Through their participatory creation of local knowledge, WFAN’s program participants engage in reflection and generation of strategies or interventions within the “structural relationships of power and the ways through which they are maintained by monopolies of knowledge,” creating the potential to “challenge deep-rooted power inequities” (Gaventa and Cornwall 2001, 70).

WFAN’s commitment to exploring alternatives, drawing from Noël Sturgeon (1995), is both critical and creative, oppositional and prefigurative. Working to end one system without providing a complete model for its replacement may to some extent be unavoidable. We make the road by walking, and our journey is an ongoing one. As Rebecca Solnit (2015, n.p.) reminds us:

Our world is both better (more inclusive, less discriminatory) and worse (think corporate consolidation, ecological devastation, the surveillance state) than the world of fifty years ago. The ways in which it is better happened because people made demands and then acted to realize them. It was not inevitable that Native Americans, women, gays, lesbians, and transgender people would gain rights and respect. The better part of our present happened because of enormous efforts, sometimes over decades or, as with the vote for women, nearly a century of effort and social transformation.

Programs alone will not revolutionize agriculture; however their successes provide ideas for how to create local change through networks that support
a more equitable system when opportunities arise. To transform and rebuild democratic power within our agricultural system, we must do more than contest inequities within industrial agriculture, but also work together to create alternative and new opportunities. Building power through women-specific programs creates new communities in which women are decision-makers, mentors, leaders, and, most importantly, change-makers.

Notes
2 Annie's Project is a national educational program for farm and ranch women facilitated by land grant universities in the United States. For more information: www.extension.iastate.edu/annie/.
3 See http://womenscaringfortheland.org/blog/2013/06/05/womens-caring-for-the-land-program-wins-governors-environmental-excellence-award/.
4 Here we contrast the dominant treatment of land with Aldo Leopold's (1949) land ethic, which views land as a biotic community of which we are a part, rather than land as something to be conquered and controlled.
5 Since our earliest days we have engaged in popular education and participatory research.
6 See http://platetopolitics.org/cultivate-2012-summit-at-wingspread/.
7 We find value in Zein-Elabdin's institutional approach, and note that her emphasis on actual work processes dovetails nicely with Dorothy Smith's (2004) institutional ethnography. However, her arguments against ecofeminism are less persuasive, given our view of ecofeminist theory expressed in these pages.

References


