

AGRICULTURE'S GLASS CEILING

If gender isn't a big issue on the farm, why are so many women signing up for women's organizations and conferences?

By Helen Lammers-Helps

So maybe today's farmers don't absolutely need the muscles of a Schwarzenegger, especially on farms with employees. Still, that doesn't mean the door is open to women farmers, or that our modern agricultural system is really as modern as we like to think.

Women who want to farm do face challenges not experienced by their male counterparts. Nor, importantly, are all those barriers unique to agriculture. Books like LEAN IN by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg have documented problems that prevent women from rising to the top in other sectors too, whether it's in business, the non-profit sector or politics.

Whether it's on the farm or in agribusiness, says Christie, "talking brings the issue to light."

Nor are women the only ones struggling for change. Men are also seeking balanced lives, with more time with their families.

Still, women and agriculture is a big topic, and it is a real one too. It is also a topic that needs more discussion not only in our farm organizations and in our boardrooms, but also around our supper tables.

For example, this past April, 600 women attended the Advancing Women in Agriculture Conference in Calgary. "This was the largest gathering of (ag) women ever held and their wish list for information was long and varied," says conference organizer, Iris Meck. There was no one major common theme but most of the topics come as no surprise: work-life balance, time management, stress management, how to be a spokesperson for agriculture and dealing with inter-



At conferences, speakers like Saskatchewan's deputy minister of ag Alanna Koch chart a path for women's progress.

generational issues. At least one attendee was explicitly looking for information on "understanding how men view us and how to build a bridge in the workplace."

As well, in Ontario, a group of young women working in agriculture started the Ag Women's Network as an informal forum to network and share information. The Facebook page for the group has 400 followers, mostly from Ontario but from other parts of Canada and the U.S. too.

Jennifer Christie, dealer development manager at John Deere and one of the founders of the Ag Women's Network says the group this past February, for instance, participated in a discussion on maternity leave benefits. It's a hot topic especially for self-employed farmers, but women working in agribusiness and who have better access to maternity benefits than many women on the farm also want their company HR staff to be more forthcoming with explanations of maternity benefits and maternity leave policies.

The group knows there are men who would like to see a more open discussion of parental leave options too, and that some men would like to access parental benefits but are deterred from doing so because a company is very traditional in its mindset. It's another indication that a wider discussion is needed, says Christie.

Still, for women who work in sales positions that are based on commission, taking time off after the birth of a child can mean losing clients and jeopardizing their long-term income potential, although having the option to work in teams is one possible solution that would allow women more flexibility.

Primary producers at the meeting also raised concerns about the lack of access to childcare for their

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Tables are full, speakers are world class, and women are taking control of their ag destiny.



PHOTOS: THE ADVANCING WOMEN CONFERENCE

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small children. "There are a lot of playpens and strollers in the milkhouses and parlours," says Sandi Brock, a sheep farmer from Hensall, Ont. When her children were young, Brock had off-site childcare but had to pick the kids up promptly at 4 p.m. every day. "Balancing farm work and childcare was hard," Brock says. "Sometimes things go wrong but both your livestock and your children are counting on you."

A lack of work-life balance is an issue that's raised over and over again by working women. On top of their jobs, women are spending twice as much time as their husbands doing housework and three times as much time on childcare.

"You feel guilty and you end up rushing a lot with too much to do," speculates Brock. "It seems to be different for guys. Guys seem to shut it off... they aren't thinking about whether or not there are groceries in the fridge."

Too often, farm women are unable to work to their full potential, says farm family coach Elaine Froese of Boissevan, Man. As someone who works closely with farm families, she has seen daughters overlooked as potential successors solely because of their gender. She has also seen cases where women are actively involved in farm operations but their opinions aren't valued, and she has seen daughters-in-law who have no voice except through their husbands.

RESOURCES

The Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council (CAHRC), a national non-profit organization focused on addressing human resource issues facing agricultural businesses, has initiated a three-year project to support women reaching higher executive roles in agriculture.

Currently in its first year, the project team is doing background and secondary research, but this fall and winter will conduct surveys and focus groups.

Then the project will develop tools to support leadership development and create opportunities for women to network, primarily through social media, together with cloud-based options for sharing and collaboration.

Age and gender also come into play. As a woman, Brock wonders if she had to work harder than a man to prove herself when she first began farming a dozen years ago. Whether it was because of age or gender, it's hard to say, she says. "I'm more confident now, more comfortable with decision-making."

A lack of confidence can hold women back, agrees Meck, who says this is one of the benefits of attending conferences geared to women. "By listening and learning they'll gain confidence," she says. Christie agrees. "Sometimes the barriers are our own internal limits about what we can achieve," she says. "By networking you realize others have doubts, worries and guilt, even though they seem very much in control on the outside. This boosts confidence."

Some companies are making it easier for women to network and find mentors by holding internal meetings. For example, Christie says John Deere holds women's forums where participants are able to discuss leadership development and barriers. Not only are these forums helpful to women, but Christie says about a third of the attendees are men who have said they had no idea that some of these issues existed. "Talking brings the issues to light," says Christie.

On the farm, that can mean a need for unique solutions. For example, Brock uses Twitter and Facebook to connect with other women farmers. "Sometimes it's just nice to have someone to commiserate with... someone to vent to who is not your husband." CG

Project manager, Debra Hauer, says that since the project was announced in April, it has received more interest than any other project they've ever been involved in. "Many women have come forward offering to help in some way," says Hauer. There are opportunities for women to get involved in working groups. If you are interested, contact Debra Hauer at hauer@cahrc-ccra.ca.

Ag Women's Network Facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/490235661074691/>.

Advancing Women in Agriculture Conference East in Toronto October 5-6, 2015. <http://www.advancingwomenconference.ca/2015east/index.html>. The conference is open to both women and men, says organizer Iris Meck.