


## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# The State of Gender Equity in U.S. Agriculture



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2024



A growing body of evidence demonstrates that agriculture is among the most gender-unequal occupations in the U.S. To create a more equitable, thriving, and resilient farm industry, we must reckon with the reality of unequal economic outcomes and access to resources for women\* agricultural producers.

Over the next 20 years, one-third of America's farmland and ranchland will likely change hands as current landowners age and sell.<sup>12</sup> Amid this generational shift, continued inequality along gender and race hampers the U.S. agricultural system's ability to keep land in agriculture, address climate change, ensure food security, and support rural livelihoods.<sup>6</sup>

American Farmland Trust's Women for the Land (WFL) initiative has worked across the U.S. in collaboration with a diverse set of partners to connect women in agriculture with each other and with the resources they need to enable their success. Through peer-to-peer educational programming, WFL has reached more than 3,000 women farmers, ranchers, landowners, and aspiring farmers in 24 states and Tribal territories and impacted thousands of acres of land and counting. This work has also afforded AFT a vantage point to observe the ongoing structural and social challenges women in agriculture and their operations face. To shift these structures and social norms, it is important to understand what the evidence shows about how generalizable these challenges are for the diverse women in U.S. agriculture and the potential mechanisms for improving conditions and outcomes for women-led farms.

This report is a synthesis of research on the status of gender equity in U.S. agriculture conducted by the WFL team between 2021 and 2023. It shows that disparities persist in terms of access to financial and technical resources and key information networks for women in agriculture, especially for Black, Indigenous, Latina, Asian, and Queer women. The core barriers contributing to these disparate outcomes for women-led farms appear to be a combination of *internalized sexism* (such as lack of confidence and risk aversion) and *institutionalized sexism* (via the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and biases in agricultural institutions and social contexts). The report details the nuanced ways these barriers impact women in agriculture, the secondary issues that arise, and the implications for farm viability, climate resilience, and farmland protection. Finally, recommended actions are offered on how agricultural service providers, producers, and policy advocates can address these barriers and foster a more equitable, secure, and viable agricultural future.

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\* For the purposes of this report, the word "women" can be understood in a gender inclusive way to include cis-gendered women, transfeminine women, and femme-presenting non-binary people who are marginalized by misogyny or impacted by women-related issues. That said, the national data on gender in U.S. agriculture, as collected in USDA surveys such as the Census of Agriculture, the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) and others, largely capture cis-gendered women and provide sparse insight into the presence of queer and gender non-conforming people in agriculture. This report aimed to compile the best available information on gender equity broadly in U.S. agriculture from both these quantitative sources as well as from peer-reviewed literature and semi-structured interviews. More granular data collection and research are needed on queer and gender non-conforming people in agriculture to get a more robust picture of how the outcomes discussed throughout this report, and the potential interventions that might support them, may differ from those that apply to cis-gendered women.

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## KEY FINDINGS

### Presence of Women in U.S. Agriculture

- Women of all races remain underrepresented as lead decision-makers on U.S. farms. Black women are the most severely underrepresented as farmers and ranchers in the U.S., compared to their presence in the general U.S. population.
- There are limitations to the gender data generated by the U.S. Census of Agriculture (COA), especially for drawing conclusions about women's presence in agriculture over time. Statistics comparing women's presence in U.S. agriculture from one COA to the next must be interpreted carefully.
- Data from a wide variety of sources does indicate, however, that women's presence in agriculture, at least in certain roles, is expected to increase in U.S. agriculture in the future. A few key statistics on this issue include:
  - 2017 COA indicated that 56% of all farms had at least one female producer involved in the operation.<sup>10</sup>
  - 2017 COA indicated that 41% of beginning producers were women.
  - With women and girls also outpacing men and boys in agricultural programs at Land Grant Universities and in 4-H programs across the country since 2009, there is reason to believe that women are expected to be an increasing presence on U.S. farms and ranches and in broader careers in agricultural industries.<sup>2 14 13</sup>
  - Women primary producers represent greater racial and ethnic diversity than male primary producers.<sup>7</sup>
  - Women are also a growing share of the hired labor workforce.<sup>15</sup>
- Survey tools provide limited insight into gender non-binary farmers. However, existing data suggest that queer farmers run at least 1.2% of two-producer farms and ranches in the U.S. and that this group is also more likely than heterosexual farmers to be Hispanic or non-white.<sup>3</sup> Queer farmers who identify as women (as defined as women married to women in the U.S. Census of Agriculture) experience greater challenges associated with their gender than their sexuality when it comes to farm outcomes.

“Agriculture needs women. In the early days of agriculture in the U.S., it was women doing the work, whether it was enslaved women or not. Women have traditionally been agriculturalists, but we've lost that. We need to re-embrace that history and do more to protect the integrity of our rural communities. Women who farm are concerned with the concrete aspects of farming, not the superficial. We need to ask women directly more questions about what they need, what would make their lives easier as a producer.”

— EBONIE ALEXANDER,  
BLACK FAMILY LAND TRUST, INC.

## What Women are Producing

- Women tend to be lead decision-makers on agricultural operations producing things like fruits, vegetables, poultry, horses, and nursery crops, which tend to be more on the fringes of agricultural production and may be less supported by government programs geared toward commodities.

## Assets Women Bring

- Though it is impossible to generalize values and characteristics to all women in agriculture, a growing body of evidence suggests that women-led farms currently operating in the U.S. tend to prioritize community-scale impacts on food security, environmental sustainability, and local economies.

## Disparities Among Women in U.S. Agriculture

- Women-led farms are not experiencing equal outcomes as farms run by men. Women are struggling economically to a greater extent, are having unique challenges accessing secure land tenure and enough land, and are receiving less government support through financial and technical assistance. They also are more at risk of experiencing violence and discrimination. A few notable statistics on these issues include:
  - Among hired laborers, most women are of childbearing age (in 2001–2002, the average age was 33, and half were younger than 31).<sup>8</sup>
  - Pregnant farmworkers and their fetuses are at increased risk of negative health outcomes due to exposure to chemical and physical hazards in their work settings.<sup>8</sup>
  - Among female owner-operators, the average farm size is about half that of their male counterparts.<sup>6</sup>
  - For every \$1.00 in profit a women-run farm makes, a farm run by a man makes about \$2.50 when farm landholdings, machinery, and other assets are included.<sup>5</sup>
  - Though USDA does not collect demographic information for all their program contracts, data that USDA has suggest that women (particularly women of color) remain underrepresented as beneficiaries of USDA's most critical conservation and farm viability financial resources.
  - Nationally, between 2015 and 2022, NRCS awarded just over 17 percent of EQIP contracts to women and just over 10 percent of CSP contracts to women.<sup>15</sup> Among the women awarded, about 82 percent of EQIP contracts went to white women, and more than

“Women that we work with over and over again articulate a commitment to natural resources, growing nutritious food for community, that’s all a strength. But it also plays into the decisions they make. In a situation where we are externalizing the environmental and social costs of our food system, these women are internalizing those and picking up the tab. That translates into women creating smaller business, they delay mechanization, hiring labor because they can’t pay a living wage. Economically it ends up being a disadvantage for them.”

— WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE  
NETWORK LEADER



82 percent of CSP contracts went to white women.<sup>17</sup> There does appear to have been a slight year-to-year increase in the proportion of total EQIP contracts going to women between 2015 and 2022, and a similar, though nominal, trend is apparent for CSP.

- Between 2015 and 2022, about 82 percent of FSA Direct Loans went to men or male-owned organizations, while just 16 percent went to women or women-owned organizations.<sup>16</sup> In that same period, close to 89 percent of FSA's Guaranteed Loans went to men, while only about 5 percent went to women or women-owned organizations.<sup>16</sup>
- Women are also not accessing information and key networks that they need to be successful in agriculture as effectively as men in U.S. agriculture.



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## Barriers Associated with Gender

- Both personal and structural issues contribute to women's unequal outcomes in U.S. agriculture.
- On an individual level, women farmers may struggle to take risks, negotiate for what they need, and see opportunities for assistance and leadership as things they want to and can pursue.
- On a structural level, agricultural institutions are hindering women's equal access to financial, family support, educational resources, and effective equipment.

- Overt and structural discrimination within agricultural institutions such as USDA created and continues to create distrust and discouragement to participate in USDA programs among women and farmers of color. For example, the 2008 Farm Bill ordered the resolution of all discrimination claims against the USDA by socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, allocating \$1.33 billion for women and Hispanic farmers.<sup>9, 4, 19</sup> As of 2019, only 3,200 of the 54,000 submitted claims were approved, totaling \$207 million in awards,<sup>9, 19</sup> leaving many who were impacted still without compensation.
- Implicit discrimination and exclusion from farmer networks play out at the community level. It often impacts how much women and marginalized farmers get exposure to resource opportunities such as land, incentive programs, key information, and more.
- Qualitative studies suggest problems such as stress, isolation, despair, and divorce can result for women in farm families due to gendered divisions of labor around child and elder care, which continue to place a higher demand on women than men.<sup>18</sup> The inaccessibility of rural childcare, thus, is a particular challenge for women-led farms and women farm laborers. Women are almost twice as likely to report childcare is an important factor in farm decisions compared to men.<sup>7</sup>
- The need for employer-sponsored healthcare necessitates that many women maintain off-farm jobs, potentially reducing how much leadership they have over their farms.
- Equipment, tools, and agricultural training are designed with men as the default user. If more farm equipment was designed for women's bodies, women may be able to be less dependent on hired labor or male partners for some farm-related tasks.

“With most of the women I work with new to agriculture, accessing USDA programs can be a real barrier, particularly for BIPOC women. I've been involved with several USDA-funded outreach initiatives to work on this but progress has been slow and clunky at best. It's one thing to find these women and explain the program possibilities, but then they need to still navigate their local USDA office, which is most likely still catering toward larger scale, male-led traditional agriculture that much easier fits their programs.”

— WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE  
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## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Provide women with effective encouragement to seek support** from agricultural networks and agencies.
- **Diversify staff** within agricultural support organizations and agencies so that the teams better reflect the communities that have historically had the least access to agricultural services.
- **Train and equip staff to provide cultural and gender-appropriate services** to enable access to programs and resources.
- Be an ally for women farmers by **sitting “second chair”** when they seek services from USDA and other agricultural support organizations.
- **Recommend women for leadership** roles.
- Advocate to **pass policies that ensure gender parity** on federal, state, county, or local boards and advisory committees.
- **Strengthen and expand peer-to-peer farmer education models**, especially among women in agriculture.
- **Focus on land and capital access first**, and conservation can follow.
- **Aggregate and distribute information on community-based resources**, such as childcare and equipment sharing opportunities.
- **Track demographics** of those accessing and seeking agricultural services and improve the ways demographics are being tracked currently.
- **Create case studies** of what’s working well to engage women and underserved farmers in accessing conservation and farm viability resources and to develop their leadership in agriculture.
- **Bolster tailored support for small and mid-sized farms**, which women and marginalized producers tend to be leading most.
- **Invest in improvements to rural community infrastructure**, including childcare facilities, broadband access, and affordable housing and transportation, and leverage any existing resources in this realm to ensure they support women in agriculture.
- **Reform cost-share models** in existing federal and state programs to reduce the up-front costs that marginalized producers need to provide to participate in conservation incentive contracts and more.
- **Explore passing a Women in Agriculture Resolution** in more states and at the federal level.



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## CONCLUSION

Women in U.S. agriculture have made extraordinary strides in recent decades and have fostered innovative and resilient agricultural operations even in the face of many challenges. The future of U.S. agriculture hinges at least in part on the extent to which women and other marginalized communities can successfully access financial and technical resources that will support the viability of their farms and ranches. Staff in government agencies, community-based organizations, land-grant universities, and advocacy organizations have an important role to play in shaping this future. By implementing the recommendations in this report and using the evidence it presents to advocate for change, a resilient, equitable future is possible for U.S. agriculture.



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The barriers for women seem to be in two categories: the feasibility and structure of the programs, but then there's also the personal stuff, like the ability and willingness to speak up when it's risky, and the time it takes to build relationships with trusted advisors."

— WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE NETWORK LEADER

To read the full report, visit <https://farmlandinfo.org/publications/gender-equity-report>.