

Two demographic trends will have profound implications for who leads the agriculture industry into the future. One is the transition from the current generation to the next. The second, which we address in this issue of the *Dispatch*, is the shift to more women in the management and ownership -- and by extension, leadership - of agricultural land and businesses. Our guest columnist, Jeanne Bernick of Kcoe Isom, helps us understand this latter trend and urges us to support women in agriculture. Davon offers lessons born from her decade of experience in managing a cotton gin in West Texas. Both articles reinforce the idea that women can and will be a primary influence on our industry for years to come.

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## Women in Farming: Breaking Through the Grass Ceiling

By [Jeanne Bernick](#), Kcoe Isom

Ask any consumer at the grocery store today what the average American farmer looks like, and the typical answer is: "A white male in his 50s." While it's true the average age of the American farmer is 58, according to USDA, if you dig more deeply you'll find some surprising developments.

### Women in Farming—By the Numbers and Tasks

The number of women farmers has tripled since the 1970s and now, according to the USDA, constitutes just under 1/3 of all farmers. More than 1/3 of farm ground is owned by women and 62.7 million acres are farmed by women principal operators, according to the last U.S. Census of Agriculture.

The roles women play on farms is changing, too. More women are full partners and owners in farming operations, and an increasing number of women are becoming key decision makers when it comes to production ag purchases, such as seed and equipment. That's because more women are running the numbers behind the farm business – they provide the bookkeeping, accounting and CFO-type services on farm operations.

It takes brains, more than brawn, to run a modern farm. Today, women are coming home to manage their family businesses after earning MBAs or following years of experience leading from the Executive Suite in corporate America.

On a personal note, I have spent more than two decades traveling the country and visiting farms as a business journalist and ag consultant. I love the business of agriculture. With 9 billion mouths to feed on this planet by 2050, we need farmers of every size, shape and gender. I am truly excited about the number of women who are coming back to the farm, who are actively seeking to operate businesses in rural America, and who want to own agricultural land.

### Much More To Do

But we need to do MORE. Though women make up 31% of all U.S. farmers, that number really could be higher. After all, women comprise 50% of the workforce in jobs outside of agriculture, and hold more than 85% of the consumer dollar. Shouldn't the face of food really be more female?

In order for that to change, however, we need conscious efforts to cultivate leadership of women in agriculture. As former Secretary of State Madeline Albright pointedly said, "There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women."

I think of this quotation often when I talk to women in rural businesses, particularly in agriculture. Is there a lack of sisterhood among female entrepreneurs that we need to address? Every woman I know says she supports other women in agriculture. But what does that really mean? Do you consider women farmers as potential renters for your farmland? Are you buying local produce from the woman-owned vegetable stand at



the farmer's market? Are you actively engaging women farmers as speakers in your local farm organizations or national associations? Do you see women as leaders in rural America, or as supporters?

There are obstacles, of course. I would be the first to admit that some of the strongest opponents of women in agricultural leadership are other women. Some recent research from Washington University in St Louis finds that women often do not support qualified female candidates as potential high-prestige work group peers because of a concept called "competitive threat" – meaning a fear that a highly qualified female candidate might be more qualified than you are. Those studies, frankly, make my skin crawl. We need each other, and agriculture needs strong women candidates to run the businesses that produce our food and fuel.

Cooperative efforts need to be made to help women break through the "grass" ceiling. It will come—if you pledge yourself to being a partner with women in agriculture. Here's to the female face of farming! Hurrah!

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## My Experience as a Female in Production Agriculture

By [Davon Cook](#)

I spent ten years helping manage a cotton gin—a "factory of spinning knives" as my husband lovingly (and sometimes worriedly) called it. I wasn't just in the office but also working with the equipment and trucks. I came home dirty on many days.

When interviewed for a magazine about "what's it like to be a woman in production agriculture?", I pointed out I was doing nothing different than my mother and grandmother—I was just getting credit for it! My grandmother hand-harvested a cotton crop at young age after her father died. My mother was equally responsible for the success of my family's business; she just didn't receive public accolades for it until recently.

A few reflections:

- Understand there will be situations that offend you, but there are silver linings to them. Have a thick skin. I remember one specific business negotiation where I created a compelling analysis to strengthen our case. A gentleman dismissed my work and unfortunately used the word "sweetie" while doing so. I was annoyed but also honored when another male in the room defended my work and corrected the situation. I had to prove myself competent, but almost all men know when they meet a competent woman. And chivalry and politeness often opened the door for a conversation to demonstrate that competence.
- Be intentional about potentially tricky male-female dynamics. I was aware that I was regularly alone with male customers and employees, and I was careful not to behave in a way that could be misperceived as flirting or start inaccurate rumors. I can think of only twice I found myself uncomfortable with the situation, and I see now how I could have handled those better.
- Parents and mentors, make sure the young women in your life hear and *see demonstrated* that they can do anything—in the field, barn, lab, or office. There are no 'boy' and 'girl' jobs. I was fortunate to have parents that never pigeon-holed me. Unfortunately, that is not always the case, but make it so for your charges.

I'm blessed to work with fantastic people of both genders—and I believe our industry has a bright future ahead as we continue to cultivate leadership in both.

