Research Abstract: Women in the Agriculture Sector

Unifying my identified course of study, a major in Environmental Studies with a double minor in Ecological Agriculture and Women and Gender Studies, I set out to do research on the women that are spearheading the sustainable agriculture movement. As a student at a State and Agriculture University, I am among a growing trend of women who are pursuing sustainable agriculture degrees. In a 2012 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture stated that, “The rise in undergraduate women in agriculture academic areas is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 2011, the undergraduate women enrolled in agriculture academic areas exceeded the number of undergraduate men enrolled by more than 2,900 students” (USDA 2012). In recent years this trend has continued, favoring more women pursuing agriculture degrees than men.

Although these statistics shed light on the women pursuing sustainable agricultural degrees, they do not capture the stories of the women who are on the ground, carrying out the emerging sustainable agriculture movement. My role for this research project is to work alongside female farmers in a variety of regional contexts. I will be working with women pursuing urban and rural agriculture projects, women that are a part of diverse agricultural networks, and all who have a story to tell about their role in the up and coming sustainable food movement. At the conclusion of this study, I will be able to offer concrete insight into the obstacles female farmers face in different contexts and the ways in which these women have overcome these obstacles. Further, I will be able to pinpoint the people, resources, and networks that have been necessary in fostering this female-powered sustainable agriculture movement throughout the United States and Western Europe.

On a broader scale, learning about how female farmers are successful in their farming ventures can offer insight for the current generation of young agrarian women who aspire to
be farmers in the future. This work is directly applicable to my concentration in Food, Land, and Community as well as my minors in Women and Gender Studies and Ecological Agriculture. Essentially, this project will cross-pollinate the work I have done in my major concentration and minor curriculum and provide preliminary research to propel my academic pursuits at the University of Vermont.

“Why are women choosing to become small-scale, diversified, organic farmers?” is the focus question for this research. This question will guide the interview questions, readings, and culminating report of this research. The number of female farm operators are increasing, but the research of why this is occurring is limited. This research will capture the stories of two female farmers in the United States, from preliminary research conducted in the Summer of 2014, and four female farmers in a three distinct regions in Western Europe: Scandinavia, England, and Italy.

We live in a society that prioritizes and subsidizes industrial agriculture. The industrial agriculture model is characterized by the high use of inputs: capital, labour, pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and land. This system of agriculture degrades land, exhausts water supplies, and poses a serious threat to human health. Despite the clear indication that industrialized agriculture is unsustainable for the future, “Government intervention in agricultural markets is growing around the world, benefiting large-scale industrial farming” (Biron 2014). As small farms disappear, replaced by large-scale industrial farms, the knowledge of sustainable agricultural practices is lost.

Despite the money and resources that support the industrial agriculture model, women are revitalizing the small-scale organic farm movement. Temra Costa, a sustainable food
researcher and advocate, wrote in the forward of her recent anthology, “Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat,” “As mothers of children, nurturers of health, and the ones in control of 85 percent of household budgets, women have the largest impact and concern when it comes to what they feed themselves and their families” (Costa 9). As women enter into the profession of sustainable agriculture, the scale of their impact broadens and the small-scale organic farm movement rapidly expands.

**Not only are women becoming farmers, they are creating thriving farm businesses.** Integrating themselves into farm organizations and networks, taking part in conferences, tapping into governmental subsidies for farmers, and welcoming the help of the community and international volunteers are all means by which various female farmers have found success. During this research study, I will be asking the farmers to pinpoint *exactly* what networks, resources, and people have contributed to the success of their farms.