

On Being a Feminist Farmer

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Dans cet article l'auteure explique la raison qui a modifié ses opinions au sujet du militantisme féministe lorsqu'elle explore les offres de travail rémunéré qui concordent avec son idéal féministe. Elle considère le travail sur une ferme biologique comme une autre forme de militantisme féministe en plus d'une compréhension plus traditionnelle du militantisme comme un lobbying féministe.

Crossing the border into the United States the middle-aged pot-bellied border official asked me what I do. “I’m a feminist and a farmer,” I cheerfully responded. There was a long pause followed by an eventual, “So what do you grow?”

In my 30s I have found what feels to me like the perfect combination of “careers.” In the winter I do feminist advocacy and popular education with a small women’s organization in Winnipeg. My colleagues and I educate and engage Manitoba women on how the provincial budget affects their lives while also lobbying government to make the budget more responsive to women’s priorities. It’s fabulous, challenging, rewarding work—a job any young feminist dreams of. In summer I work on a farm. As part of a seven-member collective, I grow and sell a wide range of organic vegetables and herbs on a piece of land 22km south of my Winnipeg home. I spend most of each week living on the farm, without electricity or indoor plumbing, eating delicious food, doing the work for which bodies are made, and often commuting by bicycle. It’s fabulous, challenging, rewarding work—a job any young farmer dreams of.

But is it feminist work?

I started growing food because I was in search of the trustworthy, tasty food of my childhood. And because I can’t stand spending beautiful summer days indoors. There were other, deeper reasons but I wasn’t aware of them until I began questioning why I described myself as a feminist *and* a farmer, rather than a feminist farmer, as if my two chosen vocations are mutually exclusive.

Prior to my present incarnation I had the amazing privilege of spending time with women on nearly every continent. In 2000, I travelled to India and six African countries where, over six months, I spent almost every day speaking with women about their lives. The way I live my life and the way I understand the world today has been shaped considerably by the stories I heard and the realities I observed. Growing food grants me the opportunity to remain connected to the women that I met, and others like them.

Women around the world are farmers. For the most part, they assume primary responsibility for providing food for their families. This often starts from the ground up. Seeding, planting, weeding, harvesting, and sitting behind a market stall are everyday realities for a large percentage of the world’s women. Here in North America we’ve largely replaced this reality of farming with large tracts of land, poisonous chemical inputs, huge pieces of machinery, and men. We’re far removed from the processes that bring food to our tables.

As I bend over planting a lettuce, picking a squash, pushing my hoe over weeds, putting wood in the cook stove, or squatting by the outside tap doing dishes, I often find myself thinking about the women I’ve met in other parts of the world and I imagine their bodies doing the same work.

It’s an honour to do the same work as these women, which is also the work of my mother and grandmother and their mothers before them. At a Grassroots Women’s International Academy in Vancouver recently I was grateful that I have some inkling of what it means to try to eke out a living off the land, that my fingers are sore from pulling weeds and picking beans, that my shoulders know the heaviness of a hoe, that the earth clings to my fingernails and heels even when I haven’t touched the soil for a week. When fellow participant Benton, a Kenyan fishmonger, tells me that there haven’t been enough fish lately and her group is considering raising chickens or

rabbits, I can (almost) relate.

And yet I recognize that this (meagre) act of solidarity comes out of a privileged position. I am choosing to earn low wages and spend my summers doing physical labour. For most women, this isn't a choice. Yet choosing the companionship (Latin for sharing bread, a spiritual act) of other farming women is still meaningful to me.

I also grow food in order to opt out of a global food system that is often oppressive to women. In my rare visits to a grocery store I ask myself: Who picked this food? Who packed it? Who was taking care of her children while she worked? What chemicals affected her unborn child? How much was she paid? How does this work impact her life? And how can I integrate feminist principles in my life so that my everyday choices contribute to dignified lives for all women in the world?

I am well aware of the exploitation rampant in the global food industry. Most of the food found in fridges and cupboards in Canada has treacherous labour practices attached to it, has travelled long distances, and has been subject to chemical sprays. Consider the migrant workers who risk their lives to cross the border into the U.S., sleep in cardboard shacks, and breathe in noxious chemicals in exchange for meagre pay. Consider the young women from rural areas all over the world whose nimble fingers are recruited for packing tomatoes or fish in large urban areas. Consider the harassment and abuse many experience at the hands of bosses and fellow workers and those who prey on them as they walk home at the end of their shift. Consider, too, the families who are displaced from their own land and the ability to grow food for themselves, and forced to be cogs in the machine of the global agribusiness industry. Many women cannot even afford to eat the food they pick (see Barndt).

Our farm collective provides several hundred families with trustworthy, *known* food. Our pay is low but the working conditions are great: decision-making, responsibility, and earning are shared and we have access to the highest quality, organic, and absolutely freshest food. Supper is always preceded by a walk through the garden for a couple eggplants, a handful of beans, a pinch of fresh dill or basil, a basket of tomatoes, and whatever else we can't resist.

It's clear to me that our field is a place of feminist activism. Each carrot we pull from the earth subverts the exploitative agri-food system. A zucchini grown by us is a zucchini not grown by a corporation, a zucchini that does not exploit the producer or poison the earth. I hope that my choice to grow food allows women farmers around the world to stay on their land, growing food for their own families rather than for markets far away.

In my household a large part of the food we eat is grown by us. Late summer is a frenzy of activity as we blanch chard and cauliflower, can tomatoes and salsa, and freeze beans. We forfeit winter lettuce and tomatoes and instead eat home-pickled carrots, sprouts grown on our window ledge, and frozen raspberries from our bountiful patch.

As a result of my summer calling, activism for me has become much broader than lobbying government, organizing demonstrations, sending out e-mails—all worthy tasks. I have also come to see pickling and weeding, canning and hoeing as feminist activism—activity that contributes to dignity and justice for women around the world. So the next time I'm asked the question: "What do you do?" my response will be "I'm a feminist farmer."

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