



KY Hanewich, "Delhi Bazaar," oil on canvas, 16" x 30", 2003. Photo: Mikhail Hanewich-Hollatz

“You Are Mostly Promised You Will Not Be Alone”

Women Farm Leaders Speak Out About Resistance and Agrarian Activism

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Les fermes sont des facteurs importants dans les changements sociaux des régions rurales. Cet article fait le point sur les expériences et les réflexions de quatre femmes en charge d'une ferme qui sont impliquées dans l'Union nationale des agricultrices. L'accent est mis sur les éléments clés de leur combat: les cibles et les lieux de résistance, les défis et les réalisations, les styles de leadership et leurs motivations.

This article is about farm activism, farmers' resistance, leadership and women's ways of working. It is the result of a collective interview with four women farm leaders of the National Farmers Union (NFU): Nettie Wiebe, Wendy Manson, Karen Pedersen and Martha Jane Robbins.¹

The NFU, formed in 1969, is the only federally-chartered, voluntary farm organization in Canada. It strives to build a sustainable food system that is based on the principles of social justice, gender equality and environmental sustainability. The NFU works on all types of issues related to rural communities from food production, distribution and consumption, to transportation of agricultural goods, free-trade agreements, corporatization of agriculture and food, rural day care, and rural health care. It is the only Canadian farm organization that has a structure designed specifically to also integrate the interests and needs of women and youth.²

As leaders of the NFU, Nettie Wiebe, Wendy Manson, Karen Pedersen and Martha Jane Robbins have worked at the local, regional, national and international levels in efforts to effect progressive social change in the countryside and to build sustainable food systems based on the principles of gender equality and social justice. What follows is a glimpse into their perspectives, experiences and reflections.

Annette: *The targets of resistance often help shape the sites, forms and strategies of social movements. As farm leaders, what exactly is it that you are resisting?*

Wendy: I am surprised at how much of my resistance

is about gender. Of course, we resist alongside many men. But a lot of the work that I have done, many of the positive things I've learned, many of the negative things I have experienced—a whole lot of it has to do with gender. The older I get, the more it seems like that to me.

Karen: Today “farm” seems to be like another “f” word—like feminism was. We are never “farm,” instead we are “rural.” It is the whole idea that: do you actually think people are going to pay you to do the dishes? It's that lack of recognition combined with unpaid women's work that was carried onto not valuing cooking for the family. Now, producing for the family is no longer valued and it has all been moved into unpaid work. We won't even call it farming, we will just put it in the rural. We won't pay for it, and you're supposed to go and get a real job.

Nettie: This has a lot to do with the whole role of industrialization, the devaluing and discounting of the reproductive process of raw production of the farm, and reproductive work among women. As industrialization progressed that particular piece around food and farm got discounted, along with other kinds of reproductive work. And no matter how much we struggle to be somehow identified—either in the workforce or on the farm—with some other kind of production, it is still deeply true that the reproductive regenerative work is our work and it is discounted.

Wendy: I think that is why I sometimes feel so dissatisfied with the way men in our sector are handling resistance. In many ways they are so ill-equipped because under any other circumstances they have lived with the cultural view that power has worked out okay for them. Suddenly, they find themselves quite disabled. It is almost like underlying power has to be really obvious, as it now is in corporate concentration, before they get it. This is largely because there are so many other underlying power moments that they like.

Nettie: It is much harder for men, for example, to resist the viewpoint, the radical viewpoint around technology

and industrialization than it is for women. It is much easier for us to see that the big tractor is actually not a step forward, and that the bigger half-ton isn't actually a symbol of progress, power, and prosperity.

It's interesting that when you talk about, and to, organic farmers, almost universally it is the women who were increasingly skeptical about the higher tech inputs and were pushing for organic production. I think that is also the case with genetically modified organisms too. It is a radical deep-seated resistance from women often before the men get there because the men are often not at

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the front end skeptical about the productive industrial process in the way women are.

I was very conscious of that when I was President of the NFU. You had to pick the issues that the male leadership around you understood and actually felt passionate about. Many of these were not the issues about which women actually felt most passionate, although they certainly understood that the trade portfolio, and the privatization and corporatization of resources were key.

But if we were just working within an all women resistance movement, we would also have talked a whole lot more about the natural cycles, the damage to the ecological and regenerative power of the earth, communities and the cultural dynamic within communities, how one empowers communities and works on the ground with children of the community, what the value of this is, and why those are also farm movement issues. As an all women's resistance movement we would have worked much more assiduously on all of this. But because we work in the farm sector, if you are going to work with small-scale farmers and resistance, you are working with the family farm. You are working within a deeply patriarchal environment. So, you have to choose your issues and build resistance with that in mind.

When I think back to one of our most successful resistance campaigns, the BST campaign,³ the way we convinced the Dairy Farmers of Canada (an all-male organization) to join the campaign was by persuading them that this was an economic issue. Yet the way in which the campaign was actually carried out in the malls, in the cities, and the movement was that women said, "BST in our milk and we are giving this to our children? Not on your life!" The women connected it to health, well-being, children, reproduction, growth, and a whole range of ecological, biological, and natural cycles.

Karen: This is the same with genetically engineered wheat. The women automatically look towards the precautionary principle.

Nettie: And women said "What? GMOs in our bread? We don't think so." And the men said: "It is going to trash our markets. Well, I guess we don't think so either. Pity, though, because it could have been really productive."

Martha Jane: One of our biggest hurdles is that we started with this industrial model. Internationally, there is a place to go back to where people look at production in a different way. For example, when the farmers' delegation from India was in Canada they talked about when women were the holders of the seeds and were the ones in the community who were in charge of reproduction. What they are trying to do now is reclaim that ground. We don't have that ground to reclaim because we started in a place that was already set up with a particular version of progress.

There is so much heart in the international work; this is how it connects to the local and why it is so important. Struggles there might be more immediate, there are more life and death situations. We censor ourselves a lot here. We care about community but we are very nervous about talking about it because it is not high tech. At the international level other people around the world are more willing to open themselves up. And once you do that, then it is easier to bring that back home.

Annette: *Together you represent over 50 years of agrarian activism. What have been your most difficult experiences and challenges as women farm leaders?*

Nettie: For a lot of women the hardest site of resistance is their own kitchens. I think there isn't a woman in the Farmers Union that hasn't had that struggle of finding, or knowing confidently enough, that you must go outside of your kitchen when there are all those undone dishes and when the demands within your own relationships in your own family are such that you are always trying to find a balance. In many cases women need to balance this while the scale is tipped with maybe not hostility, but resistance, from your partner around you leaving and devoting some energy to that other work. This is the hardest place, where you're balancing your leadership roles with your other intimate responsibilities and this is very specifically related to gender. I don't think that very often the home base is the first site of resistance for our male counterparts.

Karen: I work mostly with men and when I leave that farm work and have to justify my departure it is always the credibility issue: if I am going to take over the farm, am I going to be committed to it? Am I actually going to be serious about it?

Nettie: Which a male counterpart might or might not face. That might be a function of a young man on the farm who might face some skepticism about whether he is serious about farming. But everybody gets over that relatively quickly. Whereas for a woman, it will take a lot longer to assure everyone that you are indeed serious. This

is also a key site, but there are others. In your community you really take a risk when you set yourself out there.

Wendy: There are a lot of power politics involved. In farm politics you have upwardly mobile people who want to be leaders and you have leaders of national farm organizations who clearly have a political agenda. This defines how the work of the movement is done because it takes place in that environment where people are brokering and working politically and so on. I am not in any way minimizing their commitment to improving the farm situation. In fact, they have a second wheel [their political aspirations] that helps to drive them sometimes. This is because, again, they have a better chance of achieving power inside the agricultural sector.

My goal isn't to be powerful. I just don't have that kind of second wheel. I just have a job I want to do, but in many ways I am marginalized. For example, I worked on transportation issues for a real long time. Then, when the Province of Saskatchewan organized a group of farm leaders to go to Vancouver to the port, well, it just never came to them that they should ask me. And yet, they asked up-and-comers who were no more experienced than I was, and were equally radicalized by what was going on in transportation. It is as if I were just not seen. Because I wouldn't drive forward a political agenda that would have put me there, nobody thought to include me. Some of those men did not have a second wheel running or a political champion either, but then they didn't need one.

What I have found most difficult and challenging is that often I have to be more politically aggressive than I want to be just to have the opportunity to do the actual work I want to do. You have to work harder politically not to be marooned.

Annette: *What have been some of your most significant accomplishments?*

Wendy: When I know I helped make something happen—that I've helped to build capacity in such a way that people feel like they made it happen. I am quite often amazed that when we judge ourselves to be successful as women leaders, quite often it is as unsung heroes. The beauty in the way we do things is that it seems as though it just happened, that it happened without much work. That for me is one of the things that I value. It is like a little secret that you have, when you know that you did something and it made it all go well, and actually a lot of people thought they did it.

Martha Jane: For me it was participating in the protests of the WTO Ministerial meetings in Cancun and being part of the *Vía Campesina* process that really made a difference there.⁴ Since I was the only NFU representative there I went feeling quite unsure of myself. You have to figure out your place and your space, where you might be useful, and where your voice is going to be heard the most.

That last protest march was such a huge accomplishment because it was so hard. Reaching consensus with so many people is insane! We were up the whole night before

the final march negotiating terms with different groups, talking about who would play what role, and making sure that everyone was on side. In the end it was really collective and everyone felt that they had taken part. It was the first anti-globalization protest involving thousands of people where the strategies and tactics were collectively decided and there was no straying, nobody strayed, from those tactics. This had not happened at any of the other anti-globalization protests and it was the *Vía Campesina* that led the process.

Another thing that has been key for me is the

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generational dimension of the NFU. As a child you are in daycare [provided by the NFU] but you are also in the meeting. This makes you feel like you're part of the movement before you even start! And long before I was asked to run for Youth President, I remember spending lots of time at NFU conventions with the grandmothers of the movement.

Wendy: It also makes you feel less like you are flying solo and it makes you stronger. For example, I remember a time when there was tension in the organization about what direction the movement should take and who we were going to line up behind. One of the regional women who had years of experience in the organization was so clear-headed and she knew exactly what needed to be done. It was so much easier because she was there.

When I started as Women's Advisory, I constructed a project where I we held meetings in four different places around the province. I went out and sat down with them and said: what are we going to do? In doing this I met and worked with women who had been with the organization for years. Can you imagine not having all of those women?

Nettie: When I was first elected NFU President, one of the sweetest moments for me was the time I went to Vegreville, Alberta, to speak at a big farm union meeting. After the meeting a group of older wonderful women from that area—whom I did not know personally but I had worked with their partners, the men in the organization—came and put their arms around me and said "Oh, we are so proud, now we are there too, now we are in." And that was for me just a really sweet moment to know that, yes, this is all of us.

Wendy: There is no doubt that that generation of women who are now in their 70s had worked so long and hard in the shadows; they had done so much uncelebrated work. And when the NFU was formed those women

insisted that women have a place within the organization.⁵ But it took that long and that much work before their contributions started coming through.

Karen: I'm from the third wave of feminism and we stupidly thought that we had arrived before we became feminists! Having grown up with this organization, what shocked me when I was going through the youth and women's filing cabinets was coming to the realization that when the organization was established in 1969 those youth and women's leadership positions were just token positions! And those women changed that, they forced those doors open.

Nettie: When the NFU was formed it was those women from the Saskatchewan Farmers Union and the Manitoba Farmers Union—and that goes way back to the United Grain Growers and the Violet MacNaughtons of this world—who had had those places and who were not ready to cede them in the new organization.⁶ I do agree that when the NFU first had those places, they were a salve to the women of the Saskatchewan and Manitoba Farmers Unions, but they were not deemed to be real important positions at that time.

When I was the Women's President and was doing a speaking trip across Canada one woman who had been Women's President in the early '80s said to me: "That sure is different, they are letting a Women's President go out and speak on her own!" This certainly had not been her experience. The Women's President spoke as an auxiliary to the President. The real big farm meetings and the banquets—that was the President's work. This tells you just how token those positions were even in the early '80s!

That is why women's history is so important. That knowledge that there are others who have gone before you and who have worked in difficult circumstances. Not to romanticize the pioneering in any way but just to know that it has been done, that it can be done, circumstances change, but there we all are, sort of at the heart of what is strong and regenerative and progressive. Knowing that it goes on that it is not one single women's star that sort of rises and then drops. It is much earthier than that. It isn't about stars at all! It's about roots, shoots and seeds. And, it is regenerative.

Annette: *All of you have spent years developing progressive farm policy, building more vibrant rural communities and strengthening the farm movement in Canada and internationally. Yet, the farm crisis is getting worse and more farming families are being forced off the farms. What motivates you to continue to work for change?*

Martha Jane: I've now worked in two different movements: the farm movement and the student movement. The main difference with the farm movement is that it is tied to a sense of place, it is tied to communities, it's very tied to identity and also to livelihood. It is your life when you go home. The student movement is an issue—albeit a legitimate and politically critical issue. One of the hard parts about being motivated in the student movement is

that I can go home at night and it's not who I am.

Wendy: That's exactly it, the farm movement is who you are and what you do. I can't see being a farm family or a farmer without being part of the social movement that speaks for farm people. I can't imagine what you would be doing out there if you weren't somehow part of the movement.

One of the reasons you keep going, is that you do have sort of magic moments when you suddenly feel a deep sense of satisfaction when you are sitting with someone from whom you've just learned something important. These are kind of private and sometimes painful things. For example, one woman taught me some things about being respectful of people's experiences and women's storytelling. It was like a gift from somebody. And those things are partly why you keep being involved because you wouldn't ever receive those gifts unless you hadn't already taken the risk by making yourself open and available.

Also, you continue because it deepens you. And then there are other times when it actually does the opposite, it unhooks you or frightens you. You do something, or you are suddenly in a place where you say to yourself, okay, I wouldn't be knowing how to do this! But then somebody has pushed you there and you wouldn't have done it on your own.

Karen: What keeps me working in the Farmers' Union is my belief in community and the fact that women and youth are involved. Commodity organizations don't really deal with community. The NFU is family that I grew up with and I can't imagine dropping family. Also, it is the mentoring. Who I am today is a product of mentoring. The women in this room are classic for throwing me into situations that I didn't want to experience and yet they put me there anyway all the while saying "you will do just fine." It is almost like you can't unhook yourself because there's constantly someone pushing you forward.

Martha Jane: A strong woman once told me that often it is women who don't necessarily want to be leaders, women who must be cajoled into running for leadership positions, often make the best leaders. They end up leaders because other people have gotten them there. That was certainly my case when others convinced me to run for Youth President.

Wendy: Yes, it is not that you are ever promised that you won't be uncomfortable, but you are mostly promised that you won't be alone.

Nettie: I think that is exactly it. It is not the promise that it's not going to be hard, it is going to be very difficult sometimes. It is not that you won't be criticized, or that you won't be very unhappy sometimes. It's the promise that you are not going to be alone. Because we are so relational we also understand something about movements and working together and that is, that actually, the things that really matter, that transform the places we live in and our communities, are never going to be solo acts. They are always going to be collective efforts. In some

ways it is the power of that collective effort and being part of that which both keeps us so modest about what we can do as leaders but also strengthens us in doing what we need to do.

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¹Nettie Wiebe was elected NFU Women's Vice-President in 1988. She then served five consecutive years as the Women's President. In 1995, the NFU made history by electing its first woman, Nettie, as National President. She was re-elected in this position until 1998 when she decided not to run for re-election.

Wendy Manson has directed much of her efforts at the local and regional levels. She was re-elected NFU Women's Advisory Member for Saskatchewan from 1989-94. She then served as Chair of the NFU's Transportation Committee and member of the National Board.

Karen Pedersen served as NFU Youth Advisory for Saskatchewan in 1994 and was elected National Youth President for the two consecutive years. Then, she was Women's Vice-President for one year and in 2002 was elected Women's President. She stills holds this national position.

Martha Jane Robbins served as NFU Youth President for 4 years and has spent the last year as an NFU National Board member. In 2002 she was named as one of the MacCleans Magazine's 25 Leaders of Tomorrow.

All four interviewees provided the author with permission to conduct the collective interview, edit the transcript, and prepare it for publication for this issue of the *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*.

²To ensure greater participation and representation of women and youth the national leadership consists of six elected position: National President and Vice President, National Women's President and Vice President, and National Youth President and Vice-President. In addition, each region of the NFU also has a Women's Advisory and a Youth Advisory position.

³In the late 1990s the NFU along with many other Canadian organizations launched a campaign to block the registration of Recombinant Bovine Somatotrophin (BST) or rBGH in Canada. BST, developed by Monsanto, is a genetically engineered growth hormone that increases milk production in cows. Monsanto's nine-year struggle to introduce BST in Canada was controversial as newspaper headlines pointed to allegations of bribes, the disap-

pearance of key research files and the "silencing" of key employees who wanted to go public on the issues involved. In January 1998 Health Canada declared a moratorium on the BST. William Leiss and Douglas Powell provide an interesting analysis of the rBGH debate in Canada. An overview can also be accessed online at <http://www.tv.cbc.ca/newsinreview/mar99/milk>.

⁴The *Vía Campesina* is an international peasant and farm movement that embraces 142 organizations of peasants, small to medium-scale farmers, rural women, farm workers and indigenous communities from Asia, the Americas, Europe and Africa. For an analysis of the formation, functioning and consolidation of the *Vía Campesina* see Edelman and Desmarais (2002, 2003 and forthcoming).

⁵The NFU is the only Canadian farm organization that has an affirmative action structure specifically designed to integrate the interests and needs of women and youth. To ensure greater participation and representation of women and youth the national leadership consists of six elected positions: National President and Vice-President, National Women's President and Vice-President, and National Youth President and Vice-President. In addition, each region of the NFU has a Women's Advisory and a Youth Advisory position, and the district and local boards constitutionally guarantee positions for women and youth.

⁶Violet MacNaughton was involved in the women's suffrage movement in Saskatchewan. She was also a founding leader of the women's section of the Saskatchewan Grain Growers. As editor of the Women's Page of the *Western Producer* she provided farm women with an important forum for communication and debate. She is best known as a leader of agrarian feminism.

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