

Gender and Education in an Agricultural Community

by Aniko Varpalotai

Cet article questionne le rôle de la famille et des organismes communautaires tels les clubs des Quatre H, dans la promotion de l'éducation des filles qui habitent les régions rurales.

"You learn to speak your mind, you feel confident about it. I stand my ground.... I like meeting people and doing different things and I've been places that I never would have been, because I took my calf...."

Growing up on a farm and seeing my mother function as a co-manager of the economic union gave me a strong sense of women's abilities.

—Margaret Fulton, retired President of Mount Saint Vincent University, qtd. in Finlayson 22

Growing up in a farm family has also helped me in my career. Farm women tend to be strong, because they have to be.

—Amy Friend, Vice-President, ATS Aerospace, qtd. in Finlayson 282

Farm women in Canada have been politically and socially active for generations, through organizations such as the Women's Institutes, celebrating their centenary this year (Ambrose; Carbert; Langford). But only recently have women aspired to public leadership roles and agricultural careers in greater numbers (Cebotarev; Leckie). This growing visibility of women has had an impact on the attitudes and aspirations of rural youth. At the undergraduate level, 59 per cent of the students in agriculture and biological sciences are women (Normand). Agribusiness has broadened so that farming is only one of many options available to those with an interest in agriculture. In 1991, there were over 100,000 female farmers (26 per cent of all farm operators), with ten per cent of the women managing single-operator farms, while the others share responsibilities with at least one partner (Statistics Canada). While there has been a decline in numbers of farms and farmers, the overall proportion of female farmers has risen (Leckie).

Despite the growing attention being paid to the diversity among Canadian youth, few studies have addressed the experiences of rural youth, particularly from the perspectives of gender and education. This study uses the

rural-based 4-H clubs as the medium through which to gain a better understanding of the socialization and education of rural youth, with a particular focus on gender.

The study took place in one of the larger agricultural counties in southwestern Ontario, and included interviews with approximately 20 youth (both male and female) and 20 adults (4-H leaders and educators). Historically, 4-H clubs were divided along traditional gender lines: Homemaking Clubs for the girls and Agricultural Clubs for the boys. Over the years the Homemaking Clubs have been revised and updated into Life Skills Clubs which are intended to be of interest to both genders, but which continue to attract mostly girls. The Agricultural Clubs are attracting more and more girls, particularly in the livestock projects.

Youth growing up on farms are in the unique position in Canada of growing up in the family workplace and are involved in one way or another in the operation of the farm from a very early age. Although girls continue to work more in the home than in the barn or the fields, there are some interesting variations. Some stereotypes continue to flourish (for example, girls rarely enroll in the 4-H tractor club, and many barns still proclaim "Father and Son" as the farm operators), but there are signs of significant change in the traditional gender roles of the rural community. This has resulted partly from economic necessity (one or both parents must work off the farm and therefore the work is divided according to the availability of family members rather than strictly gender roles) as well as a reflection of overall social change in gender relations in the broader Canadian society.

Among the issues to emerge from the study is the traditional "occupational inheritance" of farms being passed from father to son and the lack of knowledge about, and respect for, agriculture in urban communities. The role of the family and community organizations such as 4-H clubs in maintaining a strong rural identity and at the same time facilitating social changes is also discussed.

The education of rural youth is multi-faceted and rarely appreciated in the consolidated schools where urban and rural students sit side by side. Particularly striking is the contradictory co-existence of traditional (gendered) ways of life and the strength and politicization of farm women and their daughters.

This article will illustrate some of the complexities and the richness of the educational experiences and aspirations of farm youth through their own words as they discussed their lives during the interviews. The article will also include the views of the adult leaders, parents, and local educators. There are lessons here for teachers and teacher educators in both urban and rural settings.

Lessons from the farm

Both girls and boys begin their education in agriculture before they begin to walk and talk as they accompany their parents at work each day (Cochrane). Gendered roles and division of labour have been more persistent in agricultural communities than in the rapidly changing urban context. At the same time, multi-faceted skills developed by both boys and girls on a farm are rarely recognized or acknowledged. Nonetheless, there is a discernible shift in gender relations in rural Canada, motivated in part by the economy. As urban and rural communities increasingly overlap through work, school, and other social activities, there is pressure on rural communities to change.

These changes are acknowledged by both farm men and women, however, contradictions abound. Jack, a 39-year-old 4-H leader says:

I guess as far as family is concerned I don't think there should be much difference. I guess if there is any difference there's nothing wrong with my son doing dishes and there is nothing wrong with my daughter going out and working in the barn, I don't believe it should be gender specific.... I really don't think there's near as much difference between genders as there was a generation ago.

Jack is a fifth-generation cattle and cash-crop farmer, the father of two daughters and a son. Despite his apparent open-mindedness about gender roles in the family, he expressed the fervent hope that his son would follow in his footsteps and take over the farm. His teenage son Kirk (15) conveys a similar mixed message:

I think it's equal, my sisters [one older, one younger] do the same things I do—I think men and women can do whatever job they want, they're both equal ... [later] I think [4-H] offers the same to both male and female, maybe a little more to males because I think it's mostly males that go on the farm.... there's not too many females who choose to go into farming as there are males....

The question of "choice" for young women is fraught with contradictions, even in an era that suggests that girls can and should pursue anything they want. Farming, as Leckie discusses, is still linked to "occupational inheritance." It is an occupation not easily entered into without the land and the capital necessary for any farming operation. Despite the growth of women in farming, the messages are decidedly mixed in the home and the community, while schools are virtually silent on farming as a career choice for either sex. As Valerie (40) explains:

... I have an older brother, it was always known that he would take on the farming, it was never questioned whether I would do it. I was never involved in the outside work, I was never invited ... my brother was going to get the farm and there was no idea that I'd be interested.

4-H clubs: head, heart, hands, health

4-H is a rural-based voluntary youth organization, originally funded and supported by government agriculture departments to prepare youth for a future in agriculture and rural living. Today 4-H clubs are in 80 countries, and Ontario 4-H, founded in 1915, currently involves 14,545 youth members, two-thirds of whom are girls (Lee; Canadian 4-H Council Annual Report).

4-H clubs have evolved from a time when girls were primarily taught homemaking skills and boys were involved in livestock or field crop clubs, to the current coeducational clubs where girls and boys together learn about animal care, crop production, soils, leadership, the environment, and a variety of other life skills formerly subsumed under the homemaking clubs. All clubs are conducted through experiential, hands-on programs. Recently, 4-H has begun to expand into urban communities.

The evolution of 4-H reflects the changing nature of rural life, including the changing gender relations. While girls have engaged in the full array of clubs offered by 4-H, boys continue to gravitate mostly to the agricultural clubs. 4-H remains a vital link in rural communities in terms of sustaining a rural identity, as well as learning the skills of rural and agricultural life.

Some of the themes which emerged from the interviews included: the importance of friendship through 4-H, the generally perceived low status of farming, the ways in which 4-H differs from school, lack of knowledge about agriculture in urban communities, and gender stereotypes. Throughout the interviews there is a strong sense of pride in a shared rural identity and the importance of 4-H in maintaining this identity (see also Varpalotai). Kate, 19, has participated in a variety of clubs in her eight years as a 4-H member, including: cooking, horticulture, fitness and health, and animal friends, but her main interest has been the dairy club which she participates in each year. It involves raising a dairy calf and showing it at the local fair. She has also become a regular competitor at the prestigious Royal Winter Fair in Toronto. Kate has a reputation in the county for being one of the few girls and women to show up at cattle auctions and buy her own livestock.

I actually bought my first calf when I was four, and I bought it from Dad ... and when I was six or seven there was a herd dispersal sale, and it was quite a good herd and I went there with my uncle and a neighbour and they told me which calf to buy, and I remember sitting there in the front row, and I had braids, and so I bid on this calf, I don't know if I waved my hand wildly ... so after that I'd go to sales and the people at the sales barn knew who I was and they knew I was good for the money, and they never questioned it....

Kate expects to become a dairy farmer and 4-H club leader herself after she completes university. Most of her own livestock club leaders have been men.

4-H began at a time when rural children lived in relative isolation. Today, 4-H has to compete with a wide variety of activities. Kate, for example, participates in soccer each summer and various clubs at school. Kate was more active in 4-H during elementary school and as she got older she still made time for 4-H but decided to specialize in the dairy clubs which run through the summer months.

Dawn, 18, an urban member, has been involved in numerous clubs including knitting, cooking, local heritage, and conservation. She has also participated in leadership training courses, regional and provincial camps and conferences, and hopes to participate in at least one dairy club while she is eligible as a youth member. In an effort to boost 4-H, farm-based members encourage non-farm rural residents or urban members to take part in the agricultural clubs by offering animals and space on their own farms. Dawn feels that 4-H augments what schools have to offer. She has learned both traditional and non-traditional skills, has developed an understanding of agriculture, and has participated in many new experiences. At the provincial leadership camp she was one of only two members from a city:

I kind of felt like an outcast, not normal, because everyone would talk about farm life, or their calf... at first I felt like an outsider but after the first day or so I got to know everybody and didn't feel so alone anymore....

Despite her generally high level of knowledge about agriculture, Dawn is surprised by the involvement of women in some farming activities:

I think the women are involved the same as the men, the same intensity, maybe just different things.... I find it kind of unusual myself that a girl will go out and plough a field... I don't find it unusual that my friends would help with baling the hay or something like that, just ploughing the fields and planting the crops, you'd think they would leave that up to someone more experienced.

Although girls tend to be in the majority in most 4-H clubs, the tractor club stood out as one that continues to exclusively attract boys. None of the young women interviewed for this study had participated in a tractor club.

Each of the members stressed the importance of friendship in relation to their 4-H experience. Most became involved through friends, others have made new friends through 4-H, and many consider 4-H central to their social lives. Some of the older girls value the networking opportunities available to them through 4-H. Kate found that many of her classmates at Guelph University are 4-H members who also have shown their animals at the Royal Winter Fair.

I think the most worthwhile thing is opening up doors... because I think we've got a changing future here and just because you've got a good education doesn't guarantee

you anything, and I think that's where 4-H can come in for a lot of people because a lot of kids when they're younger, they're shy and 4-H can kind of bring them out a little bit because there are other children around that are interested in the same sort of thing... adults who are important too because they're always involved in 4-H, the politics and that sort of thing.

Lee, 16, feels that in 4-H:

you learn to speak your mind, like in judging [calves], you feel confident about it, I stand my ground.... I like meeting people and doing different things and I've been places that I never would have been, because I took my calf...

When asked how 4-H differed from school, Lee said:

In school you learn math and stuff like that, here (in 4-H) you learn how to run a farm, how to make it work, and how to work with different animals, it's totally different things that you learn, I can learn all about a cow in biology, but I have hands-on in 4-H.

Two solitudes: agriculture in the classroom

There was general agreement among the participants that schools do not provide enough information about Canada's agriculture industry and the producers/farmers. There appears to be a shared understanding about the rural way of life, agriculture, and the value of 4-H at the rural elementary schools as these are still community-based and draw from the surrounding rural/farm families. But when students enter high school they are often bussed to the nearest city where there is a mix of rural and urban children and the differences become more apparent. 4-H is no longer something to be proud of; it is something that "country kids" participate in. Farmers are stereotyped in unflattering ways. Annabelle, 15, was most critical of urban views on agriculture. As much as she loved the farm and intended to continue living in the country she did not envision a career in agriculture because:

you don't really make enough money in farming and people look down upon farmers.... I can't understand why because we provide a lot of food for the country.

Annabelle feels that the following stereotype prevails:

that farmers go around in overalls and fork manure! It's not true... they don't know that it takes a lot of responsibility to be a farmer.... Like country people know a lot more about city people 'cause it's just more interest in that, it's really disappointing.... They don't think that people who farm are all that intelligent or anything, and you have to be, you have to have your wits about you to farm otherwise you're not going to do well,

you have to know when a ewe is going to lamb, or when the crop is ready to harvest, it's like common sense, you grow up with it... I don't know, I just think the ignorance is appalling as far as I'm concerned.

Agriculture is often not mentioned in the curriculum. And teachers seem to have never heard of 4-H. Nonetheless, these young women have found ways to bring their knowledge and experience into their schools. Winter, 16, chose to do an agricultural project for her geography class:

We had an end of the year project that was worth a lot and I did my project on beef cattle and used a lot of my 4-H resources that helped me, my friend did it on cattle too and I'm sure 4-H helped her too. A lot of people don't understand how food is grown... I think they need to know, and that farmers put a lot of work into it, if we didn't have farmers we wouldn't have that much food...

Winter's mother Jeanette, 42, in addition to being a 4-H leader is also active in the Agriculture in the Classroom program. Jeanette feels that since most urban teachers have little knowledge of agriculture, they could use their students to educate the others:

So you see, Winter and her friend picked something and they had to do an oral presentation so they taught others ... if you look back at how 4-H might work in, you'll see you've got it there when you've got kids who are interested and that's where their knowledge is and they feel comfortable doing research in it and sharing it with others.

Kate also shared her knowledge of farming with both teachers and students at her school:

I guess because I was quite proud of the fact that I was from the farm, that was very important to me, and so the teachers would ask me about that sort of thing... When I was in Grade 12 I did a very large research project on farm technology and how it's come along ... so I did this for a senior level science course and my science teacher said could you hang on to that project and come into my Grade 9 class and do it...

Summary

The education of rural girls occurs within the family, on the farm, within the community through programs like 4-H, and in the schools. The overwhelming feeling of those interviewed was that while gender barriers persist on the farm and in the community, 4-H is helping break down some of those barriers. It is also a place where girls gain self-confidence through their achievements, whether in the homemaking/life skills clubs or with the agricultural projects. More than one interviewee mentioned the importance of a sense of identity through 4-H which was not validated in school, or elsewhere.

Most of these young women, however, aspire to become leaders themselves, many of them in livestock clubs. Agriculture in the classroom, or rather the lack of it, is of concern to all. This is where educators in both urban and rural settings could develop more of an awareness. Clearly these students are proud to share the knowledge they have gained through their agricultural roots. Teachers and teacher educators have a valuable resource in their classrooms, often without being aware of it. An acknowledgement and inclusion of rural students' experiences would go a long way towards building their self-esteem, sense of identity, as well as validating their vast knowledge of topics often foreign to urban students. All spheres of education must be more aware of gender issues. Farm girls would benefit, in particular, if the stories and accomplishments of women in agriculture were acknowledged by their families, communities, and schools.

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