

Agriculture Needs More Women

A psychological case for safer food and more humane farming

SONIA FARUQI | SEP 25, 2013 | HEALTH

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Sonia Faruqi

I saw egg-laying hens crammed into microwave-size wire cages stacked up to the ceiling. I saw pregnant sows confined to iron-galvanized steel crates. I saw chickens

and turkeys that had gone lame because their bodies were too big for their legs to support.

I saw all this when, curious about food production, I lived with factory farmers. The factory farmers were kind and warm to me, welcoming me into their homes, but they viewed their animals more as edible commodities than animate creatures. The animals were nameless, anonymous masses, carefully hidden from public sight in windowless warehouses. Their lives were miserable—stinking, sunless. Though my appetite vanished, I developed a thirst: I wanted to devise animal welfare solutions.

Twenty-five years old at the time, fresh off Wall Street, I decided to leave the safe world of suits and spreadsheets and skyscrapers behind for the unpredictable, dangerous one of farm fields and factories. Switching my dry-cleaned skirts and high-heeled pumps for stained sweat pants and sturdy black boots, I launched into an international expedition. A small suitcase in hand, I investigated animal farms in eight countries: Canada, the United States, Mexico, Belize, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates.

I rode trucks and tractors, snowmobiles and motorbikes. I stamped and stacked, and raked and cleaned. I caught and caged animals, and herded and chased them. Mostly, though, I engaged in long, heartfelt conversations—hundreds of them—with farm workers, owners, and corporate executives. These individuals, I noticed, varied in many respects—ranging in income from minimum wage to millionaire, in language from English to Spanish to Mandarin to Malay—but the great majority of them, especially those who worked full-time, were men.

The official data corroborates my experience. Only one out of every six full-time farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers in the U.S. is a woman, according to 2011 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Just one out of every seven principal farm operators is a woman, according to the 2007 Census of

Agriculture.

Over the course of my conversations with men (and then more men), I began to wonder, what would be the effect of more *women* working in agriculture? Gender, of course, cannot be the only factor affecting the state of the industry (other important factors include limp legislation, rubber-stamp inspections, corporate hegemony, misleading labeling, and consumer confusion), but could gender be *a* factor?

A [study](#) of more than 10,000 Americans published by Italian and English researchers in 2012 finds that men and women overlap by only 10 percent in their personality trait distributions. The study states that the greatest difference between men and women is sensitivity, a trait defined as differentiating “people who are sensitive, aesthetic, sentimental, intuitive, and tender-minded from those who are utilitarian, objective, unsentimental, and tough-minded.”

Another [study](#), published in the journal *Brain and Cognition* in 2011, demonstrates that men and women differ in their capacity for compassion, defined as “a moral emotion related to the perception of suffering in others, and resulting in a motivation to alleviate the afflicted party.” The study is fascinating, as it shows that men and women differ not only in how they process compassion psychologically—but also neurologically. Women’s “brain processing” for compassion is more elaborate than men’s, resulting in “a greater emotional sensitivity in women when viewing aversive and suffering situations.” Women, the study finds, are especially responsive to “scenes of illness”—scenes that construct the background of most factory farms.

Other studies conclude that women are more empathic than men, both psychologically and neurologically. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *On Human Nature*, scientist E.O. Wilson describes how interpersonal differences between men and women become evident as early as birth, with baby girls smiling more than

baby boys, for instance. Men and women differ so much in their attributes and emotions that some researchers have even described them as possessing “two human natures.” Differences between men and women are thought to arise from divergent evolutionary sexual selection pressures in the areas of mating and parenting.

Whether or not society is aware of the science on the differences between men and women, it overwhelmingly agrees with it. A 2008 Pew research [poll](#) of more than 2,000 Americans found that 80 percent believe women to be more compassionate than men. In addition, Americans rank women as more honest, emotional, intelligent, and creative than men, while being equally hard-working and ambitious.

The differences between men and women extend definitively to their opinions on farm animals. Polls across the United States and Europe show that women are more concerned about farm animals than men, and are more likely to favor better treatment for them and to support increased protective legislation.

Gender differences translate to eating habits as well. Women everywhere eat less meat and less fast food than men, and are more likely to be vegetarian than men. In addition, women are more likely to purchase organic food, think about food safety, and evaluate health, nutrition, and sustainability in making their dining decisions, according to the 2013 Food & Health [Survey](#).

Producer women seem to feel the same way as consumer women. The women I met in agriculture showed a clear preference for working on organic and small farms, which are more likely than factory farms to reflect the values of animal welfare, human health, and environmental sustainability.

My conversations with agricultural men and women were starkly different. Men

tended to discuss costs, breeds, feeds, technologies, companies—profit-minded concepts. Women, in contrast, preferred to talk about their observations of animals, their opinions of them, their experiences with them—more personal concepts.



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When I asked, as I often did, “What do you think of animals?” men would sometimes repeat, eyebrows raised, “What do I *think* of them?” Women, in comparison, often welcomed the question. Some of them expressed a “love” for animals. Women, I noticed, were also more likely than men to detect personality in animals, and to view them as individuals instead of entities.

A dairy farmer in Canada told me, “Animals convert what we feed them into products we can use. They digest food we can’t to make something for us. That’s all they’re here for. We can never think of them in human terms.” His 31-year-old daughter, however, thought of them very much in human terms. “I love cows,” she said. “Every cow has her own personality. I’d say, though, that most of them are

gentle and friendly. They form friendships just like we do. Socializing is very important to them. I don't like the idea that they're just numbers, so when they're born, I write down names for all of them in my book, next to their numbers. No one knows their names except me.”

I lived with a Mennonite missionary dairy family for a while in Belize. Their dairy farm, dotted with shade-giving palm trees, was managed primarily by the youngest of eight children, a cheerful, sprightly 18-year-old. As I helped her gather her small herd of cows one evening, I was struck by her affection for her cows. “I grew these cows up,” she said. “I washed them every day. I braided their tails. When my favorite cow died, I cried for days.” She knew her cows very well. “Those two cows there, Aida and Anita, are best friends. They're always together. Belgian and Brady are friends, too—I see them hanging out more these days. Cows like hanging out with cows their own age, not with younger or older cows.”

In addition to caring more about animals, the women I met were also generally more humane in their treatment of animals. Two women in Canada, for instance, both in their early fifties, expressed to me qualms about killing baby turkeys. The women were supposed to kill—or, as the industry calls it, “cull”—any baby turkeys that were sick or slow-growing, so that the animals would not continue to eat if they were unlikely to turn a profit. But both women had considerable moral trouble with the task, avoiding it as far as they could. “I have such a hard time killing them,” one of them told me. “I feel bad,” the other said.

Not one of the husbands or sons of these two women, seven men in total, shared their feelings of hand-wringing guilt. They wrung necks with impunity. I saw a senior executive in Mexico, a patient, soft-spoken man, father of two girls, wring a chicken's neck while he was giving me a tour of his corporation's factory farms. Killing the chicken was not a bad idea in this case—the chicken was sick, lying on his back, his head somehow folded underneath his body, his legs lifeless in the air—but

what struck me was how casually the executive killed him. He did not even seem to notice how the chicken flailed and flapped for several minutes—swinging his neck, moving his legs, fighting to stand—before eventually dying.

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Full-time women are not a common sight on North American farms, but they are on European farms. In Europe, women constitute more than one-third of farm workers, and close to half in some countries, according to [Eurostat](#). This is in large part because “agriculture remains very much a family-oriented activity in the majority of EU member states,” with four-fifths of farm workers being family members. Europe, with all its women farm workers, is the gold standard continent for farm animals. The lives of European farm animals are not perfect, but Europe is the only continent on the planet where animals are legally recognized as “sentient beings” and where countries are required to pay “full regard to the welfare requirements of animals.”

Some say that gender in agriculture is dictated by the physical nature of the work, as it is in industries like construction and transportation. Though this was once true, it is no longer so. “The one and only good thing that’s come out of industrial agriculture is that farms today can have more women than before,” a cage-free egg producer in the U.S. told me. “Farming’s not like it used to be where you needed a

strong back and a weak mind,” a farmer is quoted as saying in *The Progressive Farmer*. “Now it’s better to have a strong mind and weak back.” Of all areas of animal agriculture, it is actually the most manual, dairy, that women prefer. I encountered not one woman at the crowded, concrete dairy feedlots I visited in California, where the average herd size stood at more than 1,000 milking cows, but I encountered several on small dairy farms elsewhere in the United States and the world. On small dairy farms, women are able to interact with the animals.

It’s not that all the women I met were humane or that none of the men were. Often, men and women were humane in some aspects of their jobs and not in others, or they were humane with some animals and not with others. Many workers had job descriptions that were so narrowly defined, and work environments that were so constraining, that their personal opinions could play little to no role in how they did their jobs.

If women farm workers are a minority, women senior executives are a rarity. I did not come across one over the course of all my travels. My experience is reflective of the agriculture industry as a whole. Cal-Maine Foods, the largest egg producer in the U.S., counts just one woman on its 20-member leadership team. Tyson Foods, the largest chicken producer in the U.S., with chicken factories located also in Mexico, Brazil, China, and India, has one woman on its 12-member executive team. Smithfield Foods, the largest pork producer in the U.S., with pig factory farms located also in Mexico, Poland, and Romania, has two women on its 19-member executive team. Maple Leaf Foods, one of Canada’s largest agribusiness companies, has three on its 22-member management team. At these four multi-billion-dollar factory farm corporations, women cumulatively constitute less than 10 percent of senior executives. Women have been unable to crack through the “grass ceiling,” as some in the industry call it.

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In the wake of the recent Wall Street financial crisis, articles appeared in the media with titles such as, “[Does Wall Street Need an Estrogen Injection?](#)” “[Testosterone and high finance do not mix: so bring on the women,](#)” and “[Mistresses of the Universe.](#)” In the latter editorial, Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* wrote, “Banks around the world desperately want bailouts of billions of dollars, but they also have another need they’re unaware of: women, women, and women...Senior staff meetings resemble a urologist’s waiting room. Aside from issues of fairness, there’s evidence that the result is second-rate decision-making...The number of studies reaching similar conclusions from different directions is striking.”

It took an economic crisis for Wall Street to start talking about hiring women; it may take a food security crisis for agriculture to do the same. Such a crisis in the near future is not unlikely, as factory farms, with their crowded, confined conditions and diets of antibiotics, are breeding grounds for illness. Diseases spread easily across borders as agribusiness corporations become increasingly international. (China’s largest pork producer, Shuanghui International, recently announced a plan to [acquire](#) Smithfield Foods, in what will be the largest takeover ever of an American company by a Chinese one.)

Several farmers shared with me their fears that a disease would one day decimate their livestock in one swift, sudden, unforeseen stroke. Their fears are grounded,

judging from the highly pathogenic avian and swine flu outbreaks of the last decade. The [H1N1 swine flu](#) of 2009, a potent assortment of human, pig, and avian viruses, killed up to 575,400 people, according to estimates prepared by more than 30 researchers, including nine from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A distinctive characteristic of the 2009 swine flu pandemic was that it “disproportionately affected young people.” The [H5N1 avian flu](#) that emerged in Asia in 2003 killed 378 people, a startling 60 percent of all those infected, counting only laboratory-confirmed cases. It continues to kill, these days in Cambodia. In the meantime, a new strain of avian flu, [H7N9](#), has also emerged, killing 44 in China this year.

The worldwide swine flu pandemic of 2009 coincided with the worldwide economic meltdown. Michael Lewis, author of *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine*, a book about the Wall Street market crash, wrote in a 2009 *Vanity Fair* [article](#): “One of the distinctive traits about Iceland’s [economic] disaster, and Wall Street’s, is how little women had to do with it.” His top recommendation for preventing future financial catastrophes is to fill 50 percent of risk positions in banks with women.

Let’s extend Lewis’s 50 percent recommendation to agriculture: What would happen if factory farm corporations decided to fill 50 percent of their senior positions with women?

We can begin to answer this question by considering university cage-free egg campaigns. My analysis of 440 petition signatures collected at three Canadian campuses reveals that exactly two-thirds of signers are women. Women, in other words, are twice as likely as men to choose cage-free eggs over cage eggs. So, if egg producer Cal-Maine Foods were to put 10 women on its 20-member leadership team, it might feel internal pressure to switch a greater portion of its operations from cage housing to cage-free housing. Such a change would dramatically improve

the lives of hens, shifting them from cramped cages to litter floors. (An undercover investigation of a Cal-Maine cage facility in 2010 showed hens smeared with feces, trapped in cage wires, and suffering from leg injuries.)

In addition to animal welfare, there is a second reason to think that Cal-Maine would increase its cage-free egg output if it hired more senior women. The reason is *Salmonella*: the 2013 Food & Health Survey finds that women are more likely than men to believe that “food with *Salmonella* cannot be made safe.” Cage eggs are more likely to carry *Salmonella* than cage-free eggs, according to at least 10 comparison studies published in the last decade. In a July 2010 press release, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) warned: “Egg-associated illness caused by *Salmonella* is a serious public health problem. Infected individuals may suffer mild to severe gastrointestinal illness, short-term or chronic arthritis, or even death.” Just four months later, in November 2010, Cal-Maine recalled a quarter million cage eggs because of *Salmonella* contamination concerns. If Cal-Maine were to switch a greater portion of its production from cage eggs to cage-free eggs, cases of *Salmonella* infection would likely decrease. This would be a significant stride for human health, as *Salmonella* is the most common foodborne bacterial illness in the U.S. and the most common cause of food-related death. FDA estimates that *Salmonella*-infected eggs sicken 142,000 Americans every year.

If Cal-Maine were to fill half of its leadership team with women, we could probably expect improved animal welfare and human health. Cal-Maine’s sheer size, and the size of other factory farm corporations in the U.S., means that their leadership decisions impact farm animals and consumers throughout the country—and, increasingly, the world.

One option for increasing the ranks of women in agriculture would be to start at the student level. As a university student, I often attended lectures organized by Women in Business, a student group on my campus providing career advice and

mentoring opportunities. Agricultural schools could benefit from similar women's student groups. Dedicated company recruitment efforts could also help; a new study on women in agribusiness finds that “just less than 20 percent of agribusinesses have programs to recruit women.” A third option for agriculture could be industry networking associations. Wall Street, for instance, has a few large women's associations, including 85 Broads, consisting of 30,000 women, and 100 Women in Hedge Funds, consisting of 12,000 women. The American agriculture industry does seem to be starting to recognize the value of women, judging by the two annual women's conferences—“Executive Women in Agriculture” and “Women in Agribusiness Summit”—that have cropped up in the last three years.

“I've always thought that Wall Street would be much less insane to the extent that it let women in,” Michael Lewis said at a talk. He continued that the number and role of women in the industry can “very easily change,” and that, “when it does, we'll all be a little safer.”

Food will be safer, and animals will live better, if more women work in agriculture.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SONIA FARUQI is the author of a forthcoming book about her international investigations of animal agriculture.

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