

Solutions to Modern Challenges in Gender, Agriculture and Conservation

Professor Peggy Petzelka

SOLUTIONS TO MODERN CHALLENGES IN GENDER, AGRICULTURE AND CONSERVATION

In recent decades, farmland in the United States is increasingly cultivated by operators that rent the land, rather than the land owner. This shift holds major implications for land use dynamics, particularly in conservation practices used in farming, and this variation is most apparent when rented land is owned by women. **Professor Peggy Petrzelka's** research describes the social dynamics female landlords face, while developing programs to empower land owners to drive conservation efforts on their land. When she started partnering with American Farmland Trust (AFT) in 2013, she was able to expand this research and use her results to begin to change these social dynamics. AFT is a national conservation organisation dedicated to preserving the nation's farm and ranch lands and critical natural resources like soil and water.



The way that agricultural land is farmed often impacts the surrounding areas, and can have dramatic environmental and economic impacts on a community, particularly on local watersheds. Many practices that are environmentally friendly, such as planting cover crops and using conservation tillage techniques, are also beneficial to soil health and crop yields, but require long term planning and investment in the land being used.

The efforts of agricultural conservation programs have often concentrated on the long-term benefits of environmentally responsible land stewardship; however, a large portion of the agricultural land in the United States is now being cultivated by operators who rent, rather than own, the land they farm. Landlord-renter relationships often directly affect the way that land is farmed, and can often be at odds with conservation goals. Professor Peggy Petrzelka at Utah State University, along with her colleagues at AFT, studies these relationships with a particular focus on female agricultural

landlords, in the hope of improving landlord-renter relationships for the benefit of the environment and community.

The Shifting Faces of Land Ownership

Nearly one third of the 911 million acres of agricultural land in the United States is owned by non-operating land owners, with numbers steadily rising. These agricultural landlords are increasingly absentee – not living on, or even near, the farmland that their renters work to earn a living. Many are also increasingly multiple generations removed from farming the land they own, with no first-hand knowledge of the ins and outs of working and maintaining agricultural land.

Many non-operating land owners are unaware of farming best practices to maintain soil health, and lack effective relationships with their operators to influence the farming techniques they use. While farmers are more likely to be aware of environmentally responsible land

management practices, many are dissuaded from following them on rented land, due to the great monetary and time investments. This dynamic can pose a challenge to conservation programs aimed at reducing nutrient and soil sediment runoff from agricultural land, since landlords can be hard to contact and may hold little sway over farming practices, while their renters may be hard to convince to make soil conservation measures on land that they do not own.

In 2014, 37% of non-operating land owners were women, accounting for roughly 25% of the rented land ownership in the United States. Despite owning millions of acres of farmed land nationwide, female non-operating land owners are one of the least studied demographics in the field of agricultural land tenure, which seeks to understand the ways in which different people have rights to land and how these dynamics impact land use. Research beginning in the early 1990s identified women non-operating land owners as a unique and important subset of agricultural

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landlords that had been largely overlooked in studies of land use dynamics. This research recognises that female landlords often face additional challenges when it comes to managing the land they own in a manner that is both economically beneficial and environmentally responsible. ‘My work focuses on attempting to overcome some of those challenges, resulting in more conservation done on farmland, and protecting the financial viability of all involved,’ Professor Petzelka explains.

An Ongoing Struggle for Women Land Owners

In past decades, a major assumption held about the relationship between land owners and their operators was that land owners held all the power in determining how the land was farmed. However, more recent studies detailing the relationship between agricultural land owners and renters have shown, that despite holding ownership of the land, the majority of owners have little say in how their renters choose to manage the land. The most common relationship is one in which the renter holds the dominant hand, as they are often the ones on site, providing labour, and financing the supplies used.

This is particularly true when the landlord does not live locally, is elderly and/or widowed, and even more so when the landlord is female.

Women non-operator land owners are more likely to have inherited their land and are frequently older than their male counterparts. They are less likely to live on the land, and less likely to have direct farming experience. They are more likely to engage in cash rent transactions, where the renter pays rent on the land and typically makes all management decisions, but also assumes all risk and reward, rather than a crop-share arrangement where the landlord and renter share management, risk, and rewards. As a result, female land owners are the least likely to share in management decisions or make land use directives to their renters.

Despite the large number of female non-operating land owners, very little research has been completed into the unique challenges they face in managing the land they own. These effects are at least partially related to encultured societal gender roles. Various studies of women non-operating land owners in Iowa in the early 2000s found that many female owners felt pressure to

defer to their male renters in matters of land management. Many expressed a fear of ‘scaring away’ good renters, and all felt some degree of power inequity with their male renters, many expressing feelings of exclusion or alienation when it came to making decisions about their farmland.

Women land owners are more likely to comply with the directives of male renters in an effort to keep the peace, particularly when the renters are relatives. While female owners consistently show strong feelings of responsibility towards the community and are likely to support environmentally friendly farming practices, they are also more likely to be silenced by the patriarchal social structure in rural communities, which serves to place women landlords at a disadvantage.

Working with colleagues in Iowa and Michigan on absentee landownership specifically, Professor Petzelka sought to further illuminate gender differences in non-operating land ownership, in cases when the owner was living in a different county than the farmland in question. They found that for both male and female absentee owners, land owners were more likely to be involved in decision making when they were younger



and when their renter was not a relative. However, female landlords' decision making was more heavily impacted by socioeconomic factors. Retired female owners were more likely to participate in decision making than women who had inherited land, or those that co-owned land with siblings. Women that relied more heavily on rent money for income were less likely to make decisions, regardless of age or relationship to their renter.

When looking specifically at conservation decision making, Professor Petzelka and her colleagues found an even more striking trend. Male land owners were less likely to have a say in conservation practices only when they were not related to their renters. On the other hand, women land owners were significantly less likely to be involved in conservation practices in almost all situations, except when they co-owned land with a spouse. The team's research highlighted that the gender of an absentee land owner strongly influences whether or not they will have a say in how their land is used.

Encouraging Conservation

The imbalanced power dynamic between female land owners and their male renters poses a problem to conservation efforts. Female land owners are likely to appreciate agricultural conservation efforts that benefit the environment and community, yet they frequently have the least say in the farm management practices with the greatest environmental impact, such as fertiliser choice, crop rotation, use of cover crops, and tillage methods. Non-operating land owners in general are less likely to be involved with local farming extension programs and natural resource agencies – female owners even more so.

Despite expressing strong conservation values, many women landlords surveyed in the Midwest reported low confidence in their ability to implement environmentally responsible farming practices with their renters, and further reported feeling intimidated and ignored by agricultural agency staff when asking land management questions. Professor Petzelka and her colleagues are engaged in efforts to shift agricultural agency practices to better support female land owners through both data collection and policy implementation. Programs that recognise and work with non-operating women land owners,

both resident and absentee are becoming increasingly crucial to conservation efforts. 'The number of these non-operating landowners is growing – in some regions of the US the amount of farmland rented for farming is nearing 50%... we are seeing more and more women landowners, as well as more and more landowners who are several generations removed from the farm,' Professor Petzelka notes. Conservation efforts in the farmlands of the Great Lakes Basin watershed have been of particular interest in recent years, due to massive toxic algae blooms in the Great Lakes caused by fertiliser runoff from local agriculture. The Great Lakes hold the vast majority of the surface freshwater in the United States, and provide drinking water for millions of Americans. Keeping this water clean and safe is a conservation priority.

Professor Petzelka and her colleagues are working with local agricultural supply retailers, non-operating land owners, and farmers in Great Lakes watersheds in New York and Ohio to increase conservation knowledge and improve communication between these groups. Educational programs enlighten owners and farmers on the importance of soil health to both their crops and the larger community, while structure is provided to help owners form longer term leases with renters that incentivise conservation efforts and help alleviate some of the financial risk to the renter for starting conservation efforts.

Empowering Female Land Owners Worldwide

Professor Petzelka's work at Utah State University and with AFT helps to empower non-operating land owners to take leadership positions in the management of their property and impact their communities in positive ways. Their work in the Great Lakes Basin will improve the environmental health of the watershed and be of benefit to Americans. But she hopes to take everything she learns from the three-year project to continue building and refining agricultural conservation programs worldwide. 'I have begun working with colleagues in the Czech Republic, which is experiencing a high rate of non-operator landownership of their agricultural land,' she explains. 'Our hope is to share experiences from our research and our applied work in the field and illustrate that non-operator landownership is not just a US issue, but a European one as well.'



Meet the researcher

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Professor Peggy Petrzelka completed her BA in Political Science from College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, in 1984, before pursuing graduate work at Iowa State University, completing an MS in Rural Sociology in 1991 and defending her PhD in Sociology in 1999. She joined Utah State University in 2001, where she currently serves as a Professor of Sociology in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. In 2013, she began partnering with American Farmland Trust to harness the results of her research. Her research focuses on how social dynamics such as power and gender play out on the land, with current projects examining the role of female land owners in the farmlands of the US Midwest, the social and environmental implications of varying forms of land tenure, and the social impacts of hydraulic fracturing in the US.

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