

# Women, Agriculture, and Community

by Heather Bryant, Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources

According to the US Census of Agriculture, the percentage of women who are the principal operators of farms in Grafton County has nearly tripled from 10% in 1987 to 27% in 2007. A similar but smaller trend is happening nationally where the percentages of women as principal operators has gone from 6% in 1987 to 14% in 2007.

Does this mean Grafton County is ahead of the curve? A 2001 report on family farming contains a section written by Judith Sommer on statistical trends among women farmers. According to her data, women tend to own and operate smaller farms than their male counterparts and are more likely to specialize in livestock operations. Grafton County like New England more generally, is characterized by small farms, so perhaps we are an attractive community for today's female farmers.

Of course "principal operator" can be a slightly misleading term. Husband and wife teams where the husband works the farm full time and the wife part time would be counted as having a male principal operator, even if the wife has an off farm income that helps stabilize the farm when the economy is weak. Statistics aren't perfect though, so let's just agree to say that women farmers in Grafton County represent at least 27% of our agricultural community today and that their numbers and likely their influence have grown over the last three decades.

My question is how is this growing influence used or how can we use it? The current stereotype is that women are more likely than men to connect what they are doing on the farm to their community. For example, they are more likely to sell their products direct to consumers via farmers' markets and CSA's (community supported agriculture). They are more likely to involve their farms in educational projects like school tours or more likely to choose to participate in programs that provide food to people in need. They believe these activities strengthen both the farm and the community simultaneously.

In my role with Extension, I visit a lot of farms and I am not certain the stereotype is accurate here in Grafton. These trends could also be a sign of the times or a sign of a growing interest in where our food comes from. I also see a lot of male farmers participating in the activities I mentioned above. The gender difference I do see is that the women farmers are more likely to be fascinated by the discussion of farm and community than men are. And no matter who you are, five minutes into the conversation you find it is an easy concept to understand but a difficult one to put into words.

I was pleased then, when "Agriculture and Community Connections" was chosen as the theme for this year's Women in Agriculture Conference. We have lined up a good group of "women in agriculture" from all over New Hampshire to speak to how they connect agriculture and community on their farm or in their organizations, and we have left time in the program for a real discussion of the topic. For more information download the flyer at <http://extension.unh.edu/Agric/Docs/womeninag2011.pdf>, or call the office at (603) 787-6944 and we hope to see you there.

*The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension is an equal opportunity educator and employer. University of New Hampshire, U.S. Department of Agriculture and N.H. counties cooperating.*