

Ground work

They drive tractors, juggle parenting, graze cattle and get paid less than men:
Women in agriculture face challenges that are both universal and unfamiliar to the rest of us

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COVID-19 FOCUSED CANADA'S ATTENTION ON FOOD. First, canned goods and other staples disappeared from grocery store shelves. Then, families hunkered down in their kitchens, baking bread and making comfort foods. All the while, food-processing plants became sites of serious outbreaks across the country. The possibility of food shortages and food insecurity is clearly a reality, one compounded by the climate crisis. As Canadians pay increasing attention to the food we eat, it's time to recognize those who grow it.

While men still dominate agriculture in Canada, women are tackling the challenges of 21st-century farming, too. The exact number is difficult to quantify: According to Statistics Canada's most recent census of agriculture, women accounted for 28.7 percent of all farm operators in 2016, but that doesn't include those who are part of farm teams or who classify their income differently. Women who are farming with a spouse might also not be counted.

"Nobody has stats on how many women operate in the agricultural industry or how many women operate farms alone," said Iris Meck, founder of Canada's Advancing Women in Agriculture Conference. "You can't really put a number on it." Still, those who have long been involved in the agriculture industry have noticed that women are taking on different roles and becoming increasingly visible in leadership positions.

Women still battle the gender wage gap and are less likely to have access to land. They still have to combat sexism and shoulder the extra work of motherhood. But the growing conversation on equity, diversity and inclusion, which started before the pandemic and has only gotten louder since, will hopefully help women advance in the industry.

From a long-time lobbyist to an heirloom-seed saver, these five farmers represent just a taste of what women are doing in agriculture, and the ways they are changing the industry with their skills and innovation.





Tiffany Traverse

Land and seed steward, Dawson Creek, B.C.

Two horses, a donkey, a mule, some dogs and cats and her partner, Jay, live with Tiffany Traverse on 160 acres of mixed forest. That's where she's currently growing standard Indigenous crops, such as squash and carrots, and a few experimental crops, like dry-land rice and peanuts. She is also caring for well over 100 varieties of different vegetables, herbs, flowers, medicines and native species.

Traverse is of mixed Secwépemc and European ancestry—her traditional territory is Secwepemcúlecw, or the Columbia Valley, in British Columbia. “A lot of my seed work is around my ancestral seeds and foods,” she says, “but I also steward collections for other people as well, from nations or communities that don't have access to land.”

That includes one of her many female Indigenous mentors, Caroline Chartrand, a Metis woman from the Red River in Manitoba, who passes her knowledge on to Traverse, who then does the growing. “I'm helping her to care for the seed and, eventually, as I grow out these different collections of seed, they'll be returned to her and go back into the hands of Metis people,” says Traverse. As she learned from her mentor, she uses silica to dry the seeds that she grows, and then stores them in card-stock envelopes, mouseproof containers or glass jars in a cool, dry room with a temperature and humidity monitor.

Traverse has been on the land for about six years and has learned a lot about the northern climate. As part of the Canadian Organic

Vegetable Improvement project, she does what are called variety trials: growing new varieties of vegetables, such as carrots, rutabagas and radicchio, to see how each fares in her region. She's also part of an Indigenous-led research project with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada that will use both Western science and Indigenous knowledge: Traverse will collaborate with a scientist to determine the best growing practices for heirloom oats and heirloom fava beans.

Experimentation is part of the journey of her work, says Traverse, who is also playing around with native plant species. “I wanted to focus on the way we traditionally ate, with wild game and wild roots. We ate a lot of wild roots, because we travelled with the cycles of the seasons,” she says.





Felena Pereira

Migrant farm worker, Simcoe, Ont., and Trinidad

Every year, more than 60,000 seasonal migrant workers come to Canada to help with farming and harvesting. One of them is Felena Pereira, a 36-year-old from Tabaquite, Trinidad, who has been returning to Schuyler Farms in southern Ontario for the past eight years. She operates a tractor with GPS technology to plant apple and cherry trees, and also drives a forklift.

Both of these jobs were only done by men when she started. “Being given the opportunity to be a game changer and operating these machines is something I am very happy about,” says Pereira.

Many farms have migrant workers who return each year, and Pereira’s team usually arrives in March or April. In 2020, COVID-19 border restrictions meant they were unable to come until July. Scrambling for labour, farmers across the country began lobbying to get foreign workers here as soon as possible, while the public began worrying about food security.

At the same time, workers’ advocates tried to draw their attention to migrants’ safety and working conditions. Last year, three temporary foreign workers from Mexico died from COVID-19 in Ontario. In 2021, the deaths of seven temporary foreign workers in Ontario and Alberta—some COVID-related, others not—are still being investigated.

“The hardest thing for me about coming to Canada during the pandemic was the fear of having to leave my family behind, scared of the unknown,” says Pereira, who sends money home to her two children and her mother. Since arriving here in 2020, she hasn’t seen them in person—only on video chat.

Instead, Pereira has applied to become a permanent resident of Canada. She began the process in 2019, eventually applying to be a provincial nominee of Ontario, with the support of her employer, Brett Schuyler. “I am excited to help people like Felena in their goals of permanent residency and would like for farm labour to be a pathway to residency,” he says.

When her nomination was approved, Pereira received a work permit for two years; she is now a full-time employee at Schuyler Farms. She won’t change jobs or return to Trinidad until she is a permanent resident, which she hopes will bring economic opportunities, financial security and a reunion with her children, which she calls “priceless.”

Pereira always knew her work was important to Canada’s food security and economy. It took a pandemic, though, for the rest of the country to notice. “But sometimes, it is when bad things happen that awareness is created,” she says. “Food is essential, and so too are the people who do the hard labour and intense work to get it on the table.”



Kristine Tapley

Cattle farmer and agrologist, Langruth, Man.

Interactions between agriculture and the environment were always interesting to Kristine Tapley. But she never thought she'd have her own ranch until she went to university with people who hadn't grown up on a beef farm, like she did.

"The first environmental-sciences course I took looked pretty poorly on agriculture and I believed then, and believe now, that agriculture holds the solution," she says.

So she completed a bachelor's of science, majoring in agroecology, or practising agriculture in a way that works with the ecosystem and mimics nature. She followed that with a master's degree in animal science, studying agricultural greenhouse gases.

Today, the 34-year-old lives with her husband, Graham, and their two children on the family's beef farm, which has 150 cows. They think a lot about

maintaining Canada's grasslands, one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world. Home to many species of insects, birds and wildlife, the grasslands only have about 20 percent of their native grasses remaining. Cattle have an important impact on the natural growing cycle of the grass.

Tapley believes that responsible cattle farming contributes to grassland conservation. Her favourite part of raising beef is figuring out how cattle fit into the larger ecosystem: The large herbivores can work to restore the soil by both grazing and allowing the grass to rest, a cycle that helps land remain healthy, preserves native habitat and sequesters carbon.

The family has also designed their grazing system to create habitat for local bird species, and in 2015 won an award from the Manitoba Beef Producers for environmental stewardship,

including restoring a former gravel mine to productive pasture.

Tapley also works as an agrologist with Ducks Unlimited Canada, liaising between conservationists and the cattle industry. She represents the organization on the Canadian Roundtable for Sustainable Beef, which brings together restaurants like McDonald's and Earls, non-profits like the World Wildlife Fund, retailers like Loblaws and other partners.

"It's really exciting what Canada has been able to pull together as far as beef sustainability," she says.

The group works together to figure out how to measure the environmental, economic and social impacts of beef farming, and find ways to make it as sustainable as possible from start to finish, from cattle farmer to processor to restaurant.



Mary Robinson

Barley, soybean and hay farmer, and president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, Albany, P.E.I.

Mary Robinson was born into a multi-generational family farm on Prince Edward Island and still works in a multitude of family businesses. She helps run a farm that grows barley, soybeans and hay. She is a certified crop advisor. She has her Class 1 truck driver's licence and is able to manage highway tractors and loaders. She also sells agricultural lime, which helps cut the acidity in P.E.I. soil.

All that, plus the 51-year-old has a seat at boardroom tables across the country.

Robinson decided to get involved in farm-policy work when her second child was about two. She started as a county rep for the Prince Edward Island Federation of Agriculture, and then climbed the ladder to executive, vice-president and, finally, president. In 2019, she became the first female president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA), which represents about 200,000 farm families. She wants to be noted for her achievements rather

than for being female, but she also wants other women to feel they can do the same thing.

As the pandemic began, the CFA was hard at work calling for improvements to a farm-disaster program known as AgriStability. It's designed to pay farmers when they have severe income losses beyond their control, such as extreme-weather events or trade and transportation disruptions. The market disruptions caused by COVID-19 put the shortcomings of the program into the spotlight, revealing how it still leaves farmers coping with uncertainty.

So the CFA kicked off the

Food for Thought campaign to elevate the public's understanding of the Canadian food system. Stressing the importance of the country's farmers, it asked both urban and rural people to email MPs and cabinet ministers to advocate for farms and AgriStability.

"The people I've worked with along the way would pretty much subscribe to the same end goal, which is to improve agriculture," says Robinson of her wide network. "Once you start realizing that the foundation of food is farmers, if you don't have a solid foundation and good systems for our farmers to thrive, then we're on shaky footing."



Lesley Kelly

Grain farmer and co-founder, Do More Ag, Watrous, Sask.

In 2017, Lesley Kelly and her husband, Matt, sat down to make a video. Broadcast live on Periscope, it featured the couple at home, talking honestly about their struggles with anxiety and depression—and how those struggles were connected to the stresses of farming.

The candid, unscripted video went viral, and the family got a ton of social media messages and phone calls from people wanting to help. Eventually, Kelly, her friend Kim Keller, Saskatchewan curler Kirk Muyres and agricultural-technology entrepreneur Himanshu Singh founded Do More Ag, a non-profit that helps people who work in agriculture connect to mental health resources.

“Ten years ago, I didn’t know much about mental health and wouldn’t have thought about being that vulnerable to that many people,” she says. “The rewards have been developing some deep and rich connections with others in our industry and a sense of giving back, helping others and healing our ag community.”

Kelly, who is 39, grew up on the grain farm that she lives on today. She studied marketing at the University of Saskatchewan, with no intention of returning to farming after school. “My path took a right-hand turn when I met my husband. He just loved farming,” she says. Her own passion reignited, the couple moved back to Watrous and had two children.

A year before the viral video, Kelly was tired of what she saw as endless blog posts and documentaries that only showed the negative sides of farming. She started a blog, “High Heels and Canola Fields,” to offer a different perspective, but the dark side was hard to avoid. On social media, other farmers talked about poor mental health and suicide. Her own family was going through really hard times: She was experiencing postpartum depression while the uncertainty of farming left her husband dealing with panic attacks.

On their 12th anniversary, the couple found themselves discussing it all. “And I said to Matt, ‘What would happen if we just talked about it?’” she says. “His eyes just lit up. Not many people knew what we were going through. He said it would take the world off of his shoulders.” The resulting video was a moment of honesty that the Canadian agricultural community desperately needed. ©