



Original Research Article

Negotiating farm femininity in agricultural leadership

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Abstract

A growing number of women in the Canadian Prairie region are advancing into leadership roles in agriculture, which remains a predominantly male domain. In this research we explore how professionally and managerially employed women in agriculture in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta navigate being a leader in an industry characterized by rural hegemonic masculinity. We explore and examine the personal experiences and observations of these women regarding gender, leadership, and the current state of prairie agriculture as it grapples with being more inclusive, diverse, and equitable. We found that to gain legitimacy as a leader in agriculture women are enacting a complex mix of traditional femininity, anti-affirmative action, and masculine-coded farm credibility. Women are required to be both like a man and like a woman to differentiate

themselves—both from men and from one another—as they navigate both similarity and difference in their gender performance. Expanding on the work of Mavin and Grandy's (2016) work on respectable business femininity, we have conceptualized this performance as “respectable farm femininity” to reflect the specific experiences, and previously unexplored domain of women in agricultural leadership (outside of the on-farm contexts that make up the scholarship in this area). These expectations are rooted in more traditional constructions of rural, hegemonic masculinity, but carry important weight in conferring legitimacy to women in agricultural leadership. This has important implications for how women are able to carve out their career path on the way to leadership.

Keywords: Women in leadership; agriculture; Canadian Prairie Region; respectable farm femininity; privilege

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Résumé

Un nombre croissant de femmes de la région des Prairies canadiennes accèdent à des postes de direction dans l'agriculture, qui reste un domaine à prédominance masculine. Dans cette recherche, nous explorons comment les femmes employées comme professionnelles et comme gestionnaires dans l'agriculture dans les provinces du Manitoba, de la Saskatchewan et de l'Alberta naviguent en tant que leader dans une industrie caractérisée par une masculinité rurale hégémonique. Nous explorons et examinons les expériences personnelles et les observations de ces femmes concernant le genre, le leadership et l'état actuel de l'agriculture des Prairies qui compose avec la nécessité d'être plus inclusive, diversifiée et équitable. Nous avons constaté que pour gagner en légitimité en tant que leader dans l'agriculture, les femmes mettent en œuvre un mélange complexe de féminité traditionnelle, d'actions anti-affirmatives et d'actes de crédibilité agricole dont les codes sont masculins. On attend des femmes qu'elles

soient à la fois comme un homme et comme une femme pour se différencier – des hommes autant que les unes des autres –, alors qu'elles naviguent à la fois dans la similitude et la différence dans leur performance de genre. En développant le travail de Mavin et Grandy (2016) sur la féminité commerciale respectable, nous avons conceptualisé cette performance comme étant la « féminité agricole respectable » pour refléter les expériences spécifiques et le domaine auparavant inexploré des femmes dans le leadership agricole (en dehors des contextes d'exploitation agricole directe qui font l'objet des études dans ce domaine). Ces attentes sont enracinées dans des constructions plus traditionnelles de la masculinité rurale hégémonique, mais ont un poids important lorsqu'il s'agit de conférer une légitimité aux femmes dans le leadership agricole. Cela a des conséquences importantes sur la manière dont celles-ci parviennent à se tailler une place dans une carrière de leader.

Introduction

The social, cultural, and economic landscape of agriculture¹ in Canada's Prairie Region has changed substantially in the last hundred years, and with that so have the roles, contributions, and expectations of women involved in its various dimensions. Women are now outnumbering men in agriculture college classrooms (Gilmour, 2014), and they are increasing in numbers as

farm owner/operators and in agriculture business and government positions (Statistics Canada, 2016). For example, in 2001, women made up about 28 percent of all Alberta farmers, but in 2021 over 32 percent of Alberta farmers were women (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Despite these initiatives and advancements for women, the struggle for equality and representation

¹ We use the term "agriculture" in the Canadian Prairie context, where a "productivist agriculture" paradigm reflects a contemporary, conventional, capitalist approach that is characterized by: (1) increasing production and efficiency through intensive and increased use of mechanization, inputs, and technology; (2) increasing scale and specialization of production, leading to increasing concentration of capital and resources; and, (3) decreasing number of farms and declining rural communities (Trauger, 2001).

continues,² and the industry remains male dominated: women are still underrepresented in senior management positions in government, private businesses, industry associations, and educational institutions. The patriarchal legacy³ of unequal gender relations (and corresponding gender ideologies) that contributed to women's historical subordinate position on the farm continues to maintain a grip on the ideologies, discourses, and practices within the broader scope of prairie agriculture in Canada (Kubik & Moore, 2001; Wiebe, 1996).

The focus of this research is on women in agricultural leadership positions in the Canadian Prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and their experiences navigating complicated gendered milieus during the evolution of their professional careers. Departing from previous feminist rural sociological scholarship that focusses on on-farm gender relations, we contend that the professional agriculture sector presents a particular set of challenges to women in leadership (Alston, 2000; Coldwell, 2007; Fletcher, 2015; Fletcher & Kubik, 2016; Heather et al., 2005). Expanding on the theoretical framework of “respectable business femininity” proposed by Mavin and Grandy (2016) we argue that women's organizational privilege as leaders in the agriculture industry is either strengthened or weakened through the demonstration of masculine farm credibility *and* performances of respectable femininity. We suggest that “masculine farm credibility” can best be understood as the currency with which women prove (to their male counterparts) their credibility or merit in agricultural spaces by having on-farm knowledge or

experience that is traditionally associated with men. We propose the concept of “respectable farm femininity” to analyze and explain the particular experiences that arise as a result of being both a woman and leader in agriculture. This conceptual framework helps explain agricultural women leaders' struggles and navigational strategies in their quests to be evaluated as credible and respectable as they work to emulate both similarity and difference in their gender presentation. Our work takes existing rural sociological scholarship on the performative gender work of women in agriculture and provides a conceptual framework of respectable farm femininity to account for the ways in which organizational privilege operates in this milieu. We fuse scholarship on gender and leadership together with rural sociological research to craft an understanding of the path to leadership for women in agriculture in the Canadian prairie provinces.

Being a woman and a leader in agriculture often requires a particular gender performance that encompasses both masculine and feminine self-presentation. We found that women in leadership place significant emphasis on looking and acting the feminine part, while also working in other ways to secure their role as highly regarded, dignified, reputable, and well thought-of leaders. As we demonstrate, women experience pressures to conform to notions of respectable femininity through their body and behaviour to retain privilege as a credible woman leader while simultaneously drawing on their masculine farm credibility to ensure they are taken seriously as leaders and have “earned” their right to be in the elite leadership

² See for example the four-part *Western Producer* series on Women in Agriculture (Fries, 2017).

³ The patriarchal legacy specific to agriculture in the Canadian Prairies includes both the legal, political, and social processes that contributed to the subordination of women. The ideologies that permeate on-farm gender relations are well researched within the rural sociological literature in Canada and elsewhere, but broadly include the disproportionate division of household and domestic labour as the responsibility of women (including both domestic, on-farm, and off-farm labour), the absence of participation in agri-political organizations and events, as well as the entrenchment of traditional gender roles and hierarchies (Carter, 2016; Kubik & Moore, 2001).

positions they occupy. A particularly novel observation we encountered is that women feel compelled to differentiate themselves from *other* women in a male-dominated space by speaking out against “gender quotas,” “diversity calculations” with an “anti-affirmative action” type rhetoric. This is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the ways in which women in agriculture are reflecting larger socio-cultural milieus of anti-feminist backlash (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Hochschild, 2016), while at the same time trying to publicly account for the scarcity of women in leadership in their sector. This observation is previously undiscussed in the rural sociological literature because of its relatively recent emergence in the current socio-political context.

This research comes at a time when women (and other under-represented groups) in leadership has become a popular and debated topic within many agriculture circles in Canada. Arguably this discussion and debate is not just occurring in the agriculture sector, but across most sectors and organizations (Canadian

Women’s Foundation, 2022). Broadly speaking, we argue that this research addresses the larger call to render visible the covert and often-invisible factors which undermine women’s capacities to aspire to and achieve success in high level leadership roles. Globally, we are facing a myriad of wicked problems related to food production and its environmental and social sustainability, exacerbated by a changing climate and deep political division about the way forward. Difficult and complex problems such as these require an “all hands-on deck” approach that values diverse voices at leadership tables including more women and other underrepresented social groups. The experiences and perspectives presented in this paper highlight the labyrinthine-like path (Eagly, 2020) women traverse on their way to leadership in the Canadian agricultural sector. By spotlighting these experiences, we continue to insist that more thoughtful work needs to be done to understand women’s experiences and by extension increase women’s participation in agricultural leadership.

Literature review

Women leaders⁴ sometimes find themselves in a dynamic interplay of having organizational power, whilst simultaneously being marginalized in social relations (Atewologun & Sealy, 2014; Haynes, 2012; Mavin & Grandy 2016). Within their professional milieu, they are granted organizational privilege through their elite position and formal title, however, this experience of privilege is sometimes mediated by gender and other social axes of identity such as race,

ethnicity, and sexuality (Berry & Bell, 2012; Leonard, 2010; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). According to the Canadian Women’s Foundation (2022) about 35 percent of management occupations and 30 percent of senior management level occupations are held by women; however, women of colour only hold 6.2 percent of board, executive, and senior management positions collectively with Black, Indigenous, women with disabilities, and LGBTQ2AS+ women each

⁴ The conceptual framing and subsequent analysis of women in leadership relies on the assumption of a gender binary and we acknowledge that limitation in our work. In the Canadian agriculture sector, the assumption of gender binaries is ubiquitous and apparent. Gender identity or expression was never mentioned in any of our interviews, or any form of oppression related to it therein. There is no scholarship to date on the experiences of non-traditional gender identity expression in the Canadian agriculture sector. As mentioned previously, our sample population was relatively homogeneous.

holding less than 1 percent of women-held senior leadership and pipeline positions, respectively. Atewologun and Sealy (2014) offer an elaborated conceptualization of organizational privilege and propose three dimensions: contested, conferred, and contextual. Directly following their approach, we consider women leaders in agriculture as a “sometimes privileged” minority in organizations where they face tensions and contradictions as leaders.

Many of these tensions and contradictions occur because women leaders operate within professional environments where institutionalized sexism and racism underpins gendered relations (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007; Walby, 1989). To be taken seriously, women leaders face double binds and are expected to perform femininities associated with being a (white) woman whilst also demonstrating masculinities expected of those leadership positions (Brandth, 1995; Eagly, 2020; Pini, 2005). Thus, women leaders can find themselves doing gender well (femininity) and differently (masculinity) simultaneously against sex-category (Haynes, 2012; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Shilling, 2008).

As gender scholars have demonstrated, gender, masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and contextual; they change over time and have dynamic and varied manifestations (Kimmel & Holler, 2016). What is understood as “acceptable” femininity may be judged differently based on other social identity markers like race, class, or sexual orientation (Chow, 1999; Krane et al., 2004).⁵ Worldwide, people expect women to be the more “communal” sex (warm, supportive, amicable) and men to be the more “agentic” sex (assertive, dominant, authoritative) and these gender stereotypes have not disappeared despite women’s roles having changed (Eagly, 2020). Constructions of

femininity around the body and emotions, and of masculinity around disembodiment and rationality, perpetually reinforce leadership as the domain of men and masculinity, where men are institutionalized as “natural” leaders and “ideal workers” while women are viewed as other (Acker, 1990; Pullen & Taska, 2017). As a result, women leaders have been defined and understood vis-à-vis their bodies (Haynes, 2012), reproductive capacities (Gatrell, 2011), and shaped by expectations of what is perceived to be respectable for their gender (Sinclair, 2011; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Mavin and Grandy (2016) propose that twenty-first century constructions of respectable femininity are worked out on and through women’s bodies, specifically through socially respectable bodies and appearance, a phenomenon they call “respectable business femininity.” Respectable business femininity is the nexus of the struggles and tensions through a disciplining of women’s bodies and appearance in the elite leader role. Scholarship on respectable femininity also includes women who are marginalized based on race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality in non-Western settings (Fernando & Cohen, 2014; Radhakrishnan, 2009).

Being a woman in an agricultural leadership position requires a particular gender performance that encompasses both masculine and feminine presentation (Alston, 2000; Liepens, 1998; Pini, 2005). This outward performance, as a member of what has been called the “third sex” (Pini, 2005), is multifarious and obscure. It requires a synchronous performance of both masculinity and femininity. On one hand, it requires women to be objective, rational, desexualized, and unencumbered by domestic duties, while on the other hand, they must present themselves as not completely

⁵ For the purposes of this research, “acceptable femininity” was a rather homogenous category, as all the interview participants were highly educated, European-Canadian, middle-class women, shaped primarily by the socio-cultural ideologies and practices of rurality in the Canadian Prairies.

bereft of softness, sexual attractiveness, and cordiality (Pini, 2005). In other areas of leadership, women manage these expectations by displaying an amalgam of agentic and communal qualities, conveying their likeability by demonstrating interpersonal warmth alongside other agentic characteristics (Eagly, 2020).

As gender scholars have long argued, the categories of masculinity are not fixed and are historically, socially, regionally, and culturally specific (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While recognizing there are a plurality of masculinities that vary across contexts, there are still arguably hegemonic ways of doing gender; scholarship on the gendered character of bureaucracies and workplaces has demonstrated the ways in which hegemonic masculinity has been institutionalized (Cheng, 1996). Hegemonic masculinity is the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity, particularly in Western organizational contexts, mobilizes around physical strength, emotional neutrality, control, assertiveness, self-reliance, individuality, competitiveness, instrumental skills, public knowledge, discipline, reason, objectivity, and rationality (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). Both in definition and in practice, leadership is intricately connected to the construction and enactment of hegemonic masculinity (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Knutilla, 2016; Sinclair, 1998). This enactment of hegemonic masculinity finds resonance in the literature on managerial masculinities (Halberstam, 2011; Pini, 2005). Despite changing discourses in management and leadership, hegemonic masculinity retains its grip on how these discourses are conceived and deployed. The measure of a good leader is determined by the extent of control, competition, reason, efficiency, independence,

and other agentic qualities exhibited, and these characteristics are most frequently associated with men (Eagly, 2020; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Sinclair, 1998). The degree of preference for these leadership qualities is also dependent on the political and ideological context, and some scholars note the slight shift toward androgyny in the leadership stereotype (Koenig et al., 2011), although this is not the norm.

A good leader in the agriculture arena is perceived as one who is strong, determined, aggressive, risk-taking, and knowledgeable (Alston, 2000; Liepens, 1998; Pini, 2005). The tough and powerful masculinities embedded in on-farm constructions of agriculture replicate and overlap with the construction of masculinities in other agri-political domains. Those operating in the public and professional world of agriculture draw credibility by aligning themselves with on-farm notions of masculinity. The agricultural professional, for example, may be photographed next to farm machinery or in work clothes rather than a business suit (Brandth, 1995; Pini, 2005). But with the increasing industrialization and globalization of agriculture, agribusiness is transforming the masculine identity of the “the farmer” from that of the plaid-wearing, tough, and rugged individual to the professionalized “agribusiness man.” This new portrayal of farming masculinity emphasizes reliance upon manufactured and high-tech inputs together with expertise of agribusiness sutured together with “conventional masculinity” (Bell et al., 2015).

Gender scholars have also noted the ways in which iconic understanding of “the farmer” is rooted not only in a gendered binary, racialized power, but that it is also heteronormative. The farmer, as traditionally understood, is the “ideal worker” completely committed to his employment, constructed as a hegemonic “manly” man whose singular hard work and conquest of nature, undertaken with a drive of

competitive individualism, contributes to the subordinate positioning of women and the feminine “other” (Campbell et al., 2006; Leslie, 2017). Symbolic codes embedded within these cultural narratives are depicted as binary or opposites (Bell et. al., 2015). Alternative agriculture, for example, that prioritizes smaller-scale farms, environmental and social sustainability, is feminized and portrayed as “other,” running up against, or opposite to, the traditional, or “true” approach to agriculture (Trauger et al., 2010).

Meta-analyses of Australian publications focussed on rural and agriculture studies reveals that the field of rural sociology has generally been silent on the question of racial and class inequalities (Pini et al., 2021). While feminist scholars have interrogated the figure of the “white, middle-class, property-owning, settler male farmer” and introduced questions of gender in rural research, by and large, these studies have been silent on issues of race and class. As new conceptions of “the farmer” are gradually becoming untethered from men and masculinity, it remains a subject position implicitly tied to whiteness and class privilege and “conflated with the identity of rural woman” (Pini et al., 2021, p. 254). In Canada, only 4 percent of the farm population are part of a racialized group (Statistics Canada, 2023) and there is no race disaggregated data for women in leadership within the agriculture sector in Canada. The Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC, 2023) recognizes the need for more participation from underrepresented groups (women, Indigenous peoples, immigrants, people with disabilities) within the agricultural sector more broadly and these conversations are ongoing.

These dominant narratives of conventional, white masculinity support unequal economic and power relations, since the articulation of these narratives of masculinity enables the circulation and naturalization of “truths” and “knowledges” about what it means to

work in agriculture. It is in and through the articulation of these sets of meanings that dominant patterns of farming and agricultural politics are shaped and re-shaped (Alston, 2000; Alston et al., 2018; Liepens, 1998; Pini et al., 2021). Feminist rural sociologists have established that women farmers are often expected to enact tenets of hegemonic masculinity but are also expected to remain sufficiently feminine (Alston, 2000; Liepens, 1998; Pini, 2005). As we will demonstrate, the prevailing masculinities embedded in on-farm configurations of agriculture also permeate the constructions of agriculture in high-level professional agricultural workspaces, particularly through the expectation of masculine farm credibility.

An emerging facet of this gender performance is the “anti-affirmative action” sentiment prevalent in the agriculture sector. This is consistent with broader postfeminist discourses that assert feminism (and collective feminist action) is something that is “no longer needed,” that “women can do without” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 8). Rather, as good neoliberal subjects, women understand themselves as wholly responsible for their own self-governance, success, and failure. As such, promotions and advancement should be based solely on merit because practices like “gender quotas” and “diversity calculations” are perceived as unnecessary and, in some cases, harmful to the organization. Consistent with individualist feminism of neoliberal consumer culture (Banet-Wiser & Portland-Stacer, 2017), gender inequalities are acknowledged by women in agriculture leadership, but the social, cultural, organizational, and economic structures that

perpetuate such inequalities are overlooked in favour of individualized accounts and solutions.⁶

Methods

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with forty women from within provincial government, academia, industry, and non-profit organizations. Interviewees were recruited through both purposive and snowball sampling methods. Interview participants were not asked to self-identify

their ethno-cultural, immigration or racial background. However, based on appearance and interview content, all participants in this study were white or white passing. Table 1 provides socio-demographic information on participants’ age, geographic location, and highest level of education.

Table 1: Age, education, geographic location, and sector of research participants

| Participant Characteristics | % of participants |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Age | |
| 18-24 | 0 |
| 25-34 | 14 |
| 45-54 | 17 |
| 55-64 | 35 |
| 65-74 | 21 |
| 75+ | 0 |
| Highest Level of Education | |
| High school or equivalent | 0 |
| Some college but no degree | 3 |
| Associate degree | 7 |

⁶ This research also comes amidst a time of political instability and change, wherein “an aggressive backlash against...feminism in media culture,” a rise of “alt-right” (Wood & Litherland, 2018, p. 908) political groups online, and an intensification of misogyny and racism has become ever more acrimonious and far-reaching (Jane, 2014; McRobbie, 2016).

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| Bachelor's degree | 25 |
| Graduate degree | 53 |
| College certificate | 10 |
| Province of Residence | |
| Manitoba | 21 |
| Saskatchewan | 29 |
| Alberta | 50 |
| Sector Employed In | |
| Industry | 14 |
| Farmer Owner/Operator | 7 |
| Business Owner | 7 |
| Education | 17 |
| Government | 14 |
| Non-profit | 25 |
| Other | 14 |

In this research, the term “leader” included women who hold positions of power and influence in their organizational and institutional hierarchies. Research participants in this study hold positions such as: Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Operating Officer (COO), Executive Director (ED), President, Senior Vice President (SVP), Manager / Senior Manager, Dean, Minister, and Deputy Minister positions within and related to agriculture. Also included were women who have founded their own businesses or non-profit organizations in agriculture (with annual operating budgets over \$5 million).

Interviews were conducted over an intensive eight-month time period from September 2016 to April 2017 and guided by an exploratory set of questions on career development, significant professional accomplishments, impact, and influence of being a member of “the third sex” in agriculture, advice, and future opportunities for young women. The questions were intentionally broad and underpinned by the literature discussed above that indicate the deeply embedded patriarchal terrain of agriculture, women’s exclusion and professional experiences around navigating gender in agriculture. Interviews were

recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using qualitative software (NVivo) wherein a coding framework was developed using a deductive thematic analysis with extant literature. In the beginning stages of the analysis, we employed analytic categories based on the work of other feminist rural sociologists, particularly Alston's (2000) work on women and power in agri-politics, Pini's (2005) work on women as a "third sex" in agriculture, as well the work of Canadian scholars Fletcher and Kubik (2016) regarding the impacts of climate change and rural restructuring. Other areas of analysis included scholarship on the changing dynamics in on-farm gender relations, the history of women in agriculture in Canada (particularly around participation and involvement in farming and national level agriculture policy), and the experience of women in leadership in male dominated professions.

As the research progressed, new and unexpected themes and patterns emerged, so we also employed an inductive thematic analysis stemming from the data itself. Themes around anti-affirmative action, feminist

backlash, and the use of similarity and difference as distinguishing features and markers of credibility were significant findings that informed our framework. Another novel finding we examined was the participant's use of motherhood capital (as a gendered performance) to justify and increase legitimacy of conventional food production and consumption, written about elsewhere (Braun et al., 2020). Qualitative research is an iterative and cyclical processes of going between raw data and literature and our work was no exception.

Names and revealing details about the interviewees have been anonymized with each woman assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. As such, we reference the position they hold (e.g., high-level civil servant, owner, president) and the particular sector they represent (e.g., government, industry, commodity group). For example, if a participant was a Chief Financial Officer of a major agricultural corporation the citation would be presented as (CFO, industry).⁷

Findings

In this section we identify and examine the ways in which women leaders both experience and navigate their own professional work environments and appraise their own and other women's masculine farm credibility, in an environment where they are often working to maintain their legitimacy and privilege. The women strive to be perceived as competent and reputable leaders through certain gender management

strategies as they enact both similarity to men, and difference from men (and in some cases, differences from other women) in their gender presentation as leaders. In doing so, they confer, contest, and defend privilege. These efforts and displays of credibility reveal how privilege at the intersection of gender and agriculture leadership is tenuous and complex. In what follows we examine and discuss four themes arising

⁷ It should be noted that this position/sector delineation is very generic because of the desire to protect the identity of our participants. There are so few women in high level leadership/management positions in Canadian agriculture, it would be quite easy for someone to identify some of these women by their position description alone. Because women shared personal and sensitive information in these interviews, it is of utmost importance to ensure anonymity.

from the first author's data to illustrate the concept of respectable farm femininity.

"You are always obvious": Respectable femininity and being the "Third Sex"

The above quote, from an Academic Dean, succinctly encapsulates the experiences felt by many women in leadership within the agricultural sector. Interviewees were often the only woman or one of the only women in the room in senior leadership meetings, team meetings, negotiations, or professional development events. As illustrated by a past-president of a non-profit organization: "It's been very much a man's world. Everything I've done, it's been me and men." Several women noted, jokingly, that "when you're a woman in agriculture, you rarely have to line up for the washroom" (Senior Researcher, Government).

Gender and organization scholars observe that women in management often engage a range of strategies to "manage gender" (Sheppard, 1989) which require them to redefine and rework masculinity and femininity. Women in this research described engaging in a variety of gender management strategies. One of these strategies focusses on dress. Women's bodies and appearance in organizations make a statement about their acceptability and credibility as leaders. Women spoke about how they chose their professional wardrobes to be conservative: dark blue and black suits, other muted tones, pants or skirts below the knee, and high necklines. Participants' also spoke of the dress advice they gave to young women, cautioning them about what *not* to wear: low cut and/or tight-fitting blouses, bright, attention-grabbing colours, or short skirts; in other words, "don't be a sex pot" (Dean,

Academia) or a "floozy" (High level civil servant, Government). This dress code is formulated to conceal women's gender difference and make them less distinguishable, or to make them appear similar to their male counterparts. The masculine work environment is "literally 'written on' the body" (Gimlin, 2007, p. 363).

Many of the younger women interviewed (Millennials⁸ / Generation Xers⁹) identified a very clear delineation of what was appropriate to wear in different situations. If you had to make a farm visit, which may include going to the field with a client, it is important that you wear your Wrangler jeans, cowboy boots, and have your hair in a ponytail to display your on-farm savvy (Founder, Non-Profit). But keeping some backup dress clothes and a bit of makeup in your pick-up truck was also advisable. This scenario illustrates the navigation strategies women engage in as members of "the third sex," to be perceived as legitimate in their roles as agricultural leaders and women. It also demonstrates the ways in which women actively work at negotiating their gender presentation.

Another prominent gender management strategy for women was the concerted use of humour to "warm up the room" (Past president, Farmer organization), to deflect and downplay inappropriate sexist comments from men, particularly in professional settings seen in this exchange between a female Senior VP and a male in the industry:

"Man: If you were my wife, I'd never let you talk that way.

Senior VP: Well first off, I'd never be your wife."

⁸ Millennials is a term used to describe a generational demographic cohort of those born between approximately the mid-1980s to the late-1990s (Anzovino et al., 2019).

⁹ Generation X is a term used to describe a generational demographic cohort of those born approximately early to mid-1960s till the mid-1980s (Anzovino et al., 2019).

Respectable business femininity requires that women's demeanour remain soft and cordial and not cross into the terrain of "sour old bitch" (Pini, 2005, p. 235). As one participant articulated, you need to be able to control your "bitch meter" (President, Commodity Organization) and not be too aggressive in how you present yourself and your ideas. In contrast to that observation, however, one woman revealed that she feared being passed up for a big promotion because of her friendly and personable disposition, leading others to think she was incapable of making the "tough decisions" required of the job. On the other hand, some women saw this ability to bring their "feminine qualities" to the table as an advantage, one that distinguished them from the men: "When I started my career around agriculture, I was often the only woman in the room. I always viewed that as an advantage because I looked different, sounded different, thought different, as a result I got to over-leverage my view. I had more leverage than I probably deserved because I was a unique voice" (High level civil servant, Government).

As another woman commented, "that's the thing that happens at board meetings...the generally attractive, well-dressed woman will get a lot of the attention" (President, Commodity Association).

Women also engaged in extensive monitoring and disciplining their social identities and behaviours. Several women recounted when they had to make their on-farm visits earlier in their careers, their first priority was to make friends with and focus on the farmer's wife, to gain her trust. It was generally understood that farmers' wives did not like or trust young professional women who had to interact, sometimes in close quarters, with their husbands. A mother's advice to her daughter was, "never wear something or act in a way that's gonna make somebody's else's wife be uncomfortable, because that's the fastest way to get

yourself kicked off the farm and that's the fastest way to lose your credibility as a professional in your job" (Founder, Non-Profit).

Similarly, when women in this study had to travel with their male colleagues for work, or participate in social events outside of work, many were very cognizant of the nature of the jokes and stories they told, how much alcohol they consumed, not being alone with a male colleague, and again, how they dressed, "I am super, super careful about low cut shirts and my underwear hanging out" (Founder, Non Profit). The rigour these women applied to their strategies ranged from not having one drop of alcohol at work-related events (Co-Owner, Farm Business), to drawing the line at going to strip clubs (Senior Leadership, Industry).

These findings demonstrate that women in agriculture, across sub-sectors, are still required to enact a particular gender performance that encompasses both masculine and feminine self-presentation and are still governed by the dictates of respectable femininity within a highly masculine organizational environment. The performance of respectable femininity at the intersection of demonstrated masculine farm credibility determined, in many ways, the conferring or contesting of privilege for women leaders in this study.

Conferring privilege: Hard knocks and blue Ford trucks

Privilege is conferred when women agricultural leaders act within the parameters of respectable femininity, demonstrating their ability to be seen as a woman, while also amplifying certain masculine traits, particularly around their possession of masculine farm credibility. Privilege is dependent on whether women can prove their on-farm experience and their ability to handle the "hard knocks" (Manager, Banking): an essentialized "truth" of farming. Many women spoke of agriculture

as an “old boys club” populated by aging white men who put a premium on on-farm knowledge and experience. They mirrored those expectations around masculine farm credibility, too: “The credibility that it takes to become a true leader in agriculture, you’ve got to have a real solid fundamental aspect of what it takes to get your fingers dirty out there first” (CEO, Business Owner).

There was also this sense that if you only had “book smarts” and not enough practical knowledge, farmers would detect and negatively judge that immediately (CEO, Business). Similarly, another woman notes, “I never did finish my degree, the interesting thing is with my role, experience matters more which is really important” (Senior Manager, Banking). One woman attributed part of her success and solid reputation (privilege) in the industry to her ability to “talk farmer” (Consultant, Industry) because she grew up on a farm. “Talking farmer” was defined as speaking very directly and rationally, clear and to the point, while demonstrating a level of awareness about the industry as a whole.

Masculine farm credibility is also demonstrated through certain kinds of masculine farm apparel, and the ability and willingness to get dirty, “You sit down and talk to a rancher...he doesn’t want to see a girl in a skirt [and] high heel shoes show up on his farm...you got to have your boots and jeans on and get ready to get a little shit on your boots. I think we’re making changes in how they view their industry and how they view their businesses but it’s still dirt in your hands farming” (Senior Leadership, Industry).

In order that privilege be conferred, women, or “girls,” need to wear the appropriate clothing in the appropriate context: masculine and rugged dress on the farm, skirt and high heels in the office.

Another way that privilege and credibility was conferred for some women was through their

competence and technical know-how in operating large pieces of farm equipment. One woman who co-owned a successful agricultural company, recalled all the things she did in the early days of her career to establish rapport with her bosses and clients; for example, she talked about attempting to drive a piece of farm equipment that she had never set foot in before, because she wanted to be able to say that she had done it (Co-Owner, Business). Nothing about her business or her position within that business had anything to do with her ability to drive farm equipment. Another woman who did not come from a farming background but whose partner farmed notes, “I never did learn how to drive a tractor...although I use the farm background when I was doing presentations and speaking because it gave me that credibility, you know?” (Past President, Non-Profit). This woman went on to say that she would always check with her husband about the status of the farm or how the crops were doing before she went to any meetings or presentations so that she could speak knowledgeably about their farm, even though her work was about the politics of organic certification, and not equipment or the technical specifications of her farm in that moment. Finally, privilege was also perceived to be conferred through the type of vehicle one chose to drive, “I’ve got the farm cred! I pull up in my big blue [Ford] F-150 and then they bash me for driving a Ford, and then we carry on, right?” (Senior Manager, Banking). Her vehicle was a particular point of pride and a way for her to convey her legitimacy.

One of the most highly regarded and powerful women in Canadian agricultural leadership recounted her connection and experiences on the farm to her position within the industry and her reputation around the corporate leadership table,

“so, my levelling in my professional career has been my farm...[it] was very tough when I grew

up, so I had the pain of that and the learning from the hardship of that, to [the large farm] that we've been able to grow quite successfully here. If it hadn't been for that initial hardship, then the [industry] experience, then translated back to [my] farm.... I would not be where I'm at in my career if it hadn't been for that" (Senior Leadership, Industry).

She strongly believes that her privilege was conferred (particularly as an inductee to the "old boys club") as a direct result of her experiences and knowledge of farming, particularly making it through hardships and the singular building of their own family farm via hard work and mental tenacity.

Even when women were already firmly established in their leadership positions, there was a deep awareness of how their position was never to be taken for granted and that it was important to assume nothing, "I think as a woman...and in the bigger political context, what I always had to be conscious of, what I am deeply aware of—I don't come into the room with the credentials already established. Even as a farmer. Even as a farmer among farmers. I don't come in with my credentials already on the table. I usually have to come in, even as the president, I'd have to come in and establish my credentials in one way or another" (Past President, Non-Profit; Founder, International Non-Profit, Farmer).

Privilege among women in agriculture leadership was consistently conferred through the display of masculine farm credibility—from experience, to dress, to equipment, and transportation choices—women felt they needed to boldly enact and exhibit their worthiness by the figurative "dirt" on their hands, demonstrating their ability to be, in some ways, like a man. While many

of these women held positions of power via their organizational positioning, it is also evident that their privilege is not always stable and that they continually needed to work on establishing or re-establishing that privilege via their masculine farm credibility, layered on to the negotiation of their respectable femininity. This was consistent across all sectors and professional positions.

Contesting privilege: Being more than a "diversity calculation"

High level positions of privilege were protected by women and that manifested itself through a strong and pervasive anti-affirmative action stance among over half of research participants. "You need to be able to earn your spot. I truly fundamentally believe that" (CEO, Ranch). When asked if she thought there was a need for more women in positions of leadership, one woman commented, "I don't think you need to be in a board position because you're a woman—that's just really not what I believe in. I think if you can do the job well and you're a woman, great! If you're a guy and can do the job well, great" (Co-Owner, Ag Retail). Repeatedly, interviewees spoke of the importance of finding 'the right person for the job' and women not being hired or promoted just because they're women. "I believe you get the job on merit. And...if you don't have the merit, get it! Don't complain and bitch about it. Go and do something. Go and be the best at what you can be, as opposed to saying 'well, I didn't get it because of this.' No! You didn't get it because you didn't get it. Now figure out how you're going to get it if that's what you want, go and get it. But to say 50 percent of everything should be female, I think that's absolutely absurd and rubbish!" (CEO, Ag Marketing).¹⁰

¹⁰ It should be noted that before the time of the interviews, there were ongoing discussions, research, and programs within Canadian agriculture circles about the prolonged absence and barriers to women in leadership (on boards, in business, and

Many women did not elaborate on what those “right” requirements would be, or who got to adjudicate them—but the tone and prevalent topic of the need for farm experience leads us to infer that some form of masculine farm credibility is a piece of what makes you “the right person for the job.” This anti-affirmative stance was a way that participants discursively created a gendered “other” against who they could define themselves (or demonstrate who they were not) as ones who “earned their spot,” who were legitimately the “right person for the job” and not just, “quota fillers” (Senior VP, Industry) appointed for “diversity calculations” (Senior VP, Industry). Through the process of rhetorically distancing themselves from other women (presumably those hired because of affirmative action policies), women in agriculture leadership simultaneously aligned themselves with their similarity with men (being hired on merit alone).

Those women who assessed themselves as not possessing masculine farm credibility, consistently said that they needed to go above and beyond their expected deliverables, while also putting effort into developing relationships with farmers and industry experts. “I have worked so hard to build relationships. And so, when I lacked the credibility and knowledge, I was working on building relationships” (High level civil servant, Provincial Government). Another young leader in the commodity sector noted that because men are not used to seeing young women in leadership roles there is a need for women leaders to establish legitimacy, almost immediately:

I think that what you have to do is you have to prove yourself a lot more quickly than you would if I were a young man in this role. And so I think you have to establish credibility very quickly...the expectation is that women are going to have to work a little harder and faster. I think if you can do that, you can be a lot more confident. I don't worry about the fact that I don't have a farm background. I don't worry about the fact that I'm often in a room with much older men and I am a younger woman. I don't worry about those things *as much* if I know that I can prove myself. And it's taken me three years to get here.

Other times, women mentioned how they would be “tested” by farmers or other influential players in the sector, “they’ll ask you a couple of questions to test you out, and they’ll want to see what kind of knowledge you have and nine and a half out of ten times...you’re gonna get a stamp of approval just because you can get across that you understood their industry without being arrogant about it” (Senior Manager, Agriculture Banking).

Granted, it appears privilege is generally conferred in this situation. But it should also be noted that the phrase, “without being arrogant about it,” is another example of how women enact respectable femininity, not being aggressive or arrogant, but maintaining that warm and kind female societal role expectation in their professional display of credibility and knowledge.

agri-politics). Our research came at a time when the newly elected Federal Liberal party announced the first gender balanced cabinet, a move some of the women who were interviewed took issue with. While this may have sparked these issues to become “top of mind” with some of the women I interviewed, it is hard to say whether that bias impacted our findings and the strong anti-affirmative action sentiment prevalent therein. Our sense from the extensive conversations with women, in combination with the literature on women in leadership, was that this strong preference for merit-based achievement and aversion to “gender quotas” preceded the actions of the Federal Liberal Party.

Defending privilege: Being true to yourself and unapologetic about leadership style

Of the broad cross-section of women leaders interviewed, there was a small percentage of women (approximately 10 percent) who rejected and challenged the idea that they needed to enact a “third sex” subject positioning or that they were somehow unqualified if they did not possess enough similarity to a man via their masculine farm credibility. When women reject and/or challenge certain constructions of acceptable femininity or the requisite masculine farm credibility, they also defend their privilege. Privilege can be defended when women take a stand against prescriptive norms of respectable femininity and masculine farm credibility as being part of their legitimacy or credibility as a leader (Mavin & Grandy, 2016). For example, some of the strongest voices of dissent came from two younger women who co-founded a “Women in Agriculture” group in one of the Prairie Provinces. This organization has grown in size and recognition and is a well-used resource for many women working in agriculture in Canada. These co-founders are asking difficult questions about mental health and gender inequality within the industry, while also raising awareness around sexual harassment, sexual assault, and the institutional silencing mechanisms that prevent women from speaking out. As strong and fierce advocates for women in agriculture they argue that “we don’t want the next generation of women to pay the same dues that we did.... We have to make it better for them, for whatever they’re going to run up against. We should be doing everything we can” (Co-founder and President, Non-Profit). This included pushing back against expected gender performances and other expectations: “It was really just focussing on my skills and abilities and not worrying if they were feminine or

masculine or how they’d be perceived” (Co-founder, Non-Profit).

When speaking about leadership and the ability to be a leader in agriculture, she said: “I think everyone in this industry is a leader in their own way, and everyone in this industry has something to contribute, no matter how big or how small it is. Whether it’s your first day in the industry or you’ve been in the industry for seventy years.”

Several other younger women, particularly in the not-for-profit sector and a few business owners, many of whom did not come from any kind of farm background, were not intimidated by the fact that they did not have masculine farm credibility because they felt that what they were doing was important and certain kinds of behaviours, gender presentation, and credentials did not have any direct impact on their work.

Another example of how one woman challenged certain gendered requirements was through her leadership style. As a long-standing civil servant, she spoke of how she refused to lead her staff in the rude, abrupt, and disrespectful way that she saw exhibited by many of her male colleagues. She outright rejected the hegemonic masculine style of leadership that she saw throughout her tenure in the agriculture department, and instead worked tirelessly to create a different and more progressive work environment for her staff, “I have been very intentional that the feminine side of me is who I am as a leader. I am not going to become the butch. I am not going to use crude language. I’m not playing that game.... And my staff will tell you that I have very high standards, but I treat them with the utmost of respect. You will never see me yelling or [using] condescending, disrespectful behaviour” (High level civil servant, Government).

She was highly aware of what she was doing and how different her approach to leadership was in that

department. Part of her rebellion was also to wear “funky shoes” and have an eclectic fashion sense, thereby going against the norm of wearing conservative dress clothes and dark, drab colours.

A few women also felt that it was most important to be authentic and transparent, and that trying to “fit in” or hide their lack of farm experience was not a smart or sustainable career move. “I felt I had to be who I am...so I decided I better be true to myself because I couldn’t keep up a pretense for very long and, eventually, people

would see through that” (Executive Director, Non-Profit and Research). A common strategy with these women was to focus on the relationship building, and to continually build on their existing professional skills and experiences. Granted, many of them still felt the slight unease of not having the “dirt on your hands” farm experience but worked hard to not let that get in the way of their success or take up too much of their mental energy.

Discussion

In the deeply patriarchal and hegemonically masculine paradigm of agriculture in the Canadian Prairies (Kubik & Moore, 2001) leadership emerges from a complex web of gendered performances and expectations. Women in agriculture are judged on job performance, appearance, and their masculine farm credibility, while men are judged on their work (Alston, 2000; Brower, 2013; Pini, 2005). At the nexus of embodied, masculine leadership requirements and ambiguous expectations of respectable femininity, women in agricultural leadership experience a myriad of conflicting requirements of appearance and demeanour as well as overt and covert gatekeeping of high-level leadership positions. Being “the right person for the job” is a deceptively simple prerequisite for a job that has seemingly more unwritten requirements than written ones.

Respectable farm femininity thus illuminates the subtle ways in which particular historic naturalized “truths” present in on-farm theorizations of gender and agriculture, particularly rural, white, managerial masculinity, have consequences for women agricultural leaders in contemporary work contexts. While we acknowledge the ways in which on-farm gender

relations are slowly changing (including a recognition that there is an imbalance) and efforts are being made to promote and train women leaders in the sector, there remain those undercurrents that signal “true” agricultural leadership can be only be garnered if there is an alignment with on-farm notions of conventional masculinity and a tangible demonstration of that likeness to men and masculinity prior to advancement.

Privilege is not guaranteed for women agricultural leaders, despite achieving high level positions and their competent performance therein. At the intersection with gender, privilege (through organizational position) is relational, fluid, and dynamic and can be stabilized or destabilized through peer approval and masculine farm credibility. Achieving the right combination of femininity and masculinity, appreciable to both men and women, farm credibility is vital to having privilege conferred by men and other women. By extending Mavin and Grandy’s (2016) work vis-à-vis integrating women’s appearance, behaviour, *and* on-farm masculine work into existing understandings of “conferring” and “contesting” privilege, we have furthered understanding of the instability of privilege, particularly when combined with embedded notions of

managerial masculinity and acceptable femininity in the Canadian agriculture context. This research lays out the social, cultural, and political environment that women in the Canadian Prairies work in, characterized by a strong aversion to any policy or program that may give women an “unearned” advantage over men.

Accessing and maintaining privilege at the intersections of gender, body, organizational position, and previous farm experience is relational, and is played out through how women leaders conduct themselves, their appearance, and their display of masculine farm credibility. Subsequently, this is how other women and men afford them privilege and respect. When they do get respectable farm femininity “right,” privilege as a leader is rewarded and conferred; for example, feeling confident that their position in the “old boys club” is a result of their hard work and tribulations on the farm. These accounts reveal a prevalence of contesting privilege, manifested through strong gatekeeping behaviour and insistence that positions of leadership should be awarded to “the right person for the job,” but which raise questions about any clear norms of what those requirements, of women’s appearance, behaviour, and credibility, should be.

Overall, the norms of respectable farm femininity are ambiguous. Efforts to confer, contest, and defend privilege illustrate how many women embrace, resist, fail and navigate through such nebulous constructions of acceptable femininity, farm credibility, and leadership. Our research illustrates how women may acknowledge particular constructions of respectable farm femininity, but also challenge and/or reject them, defending their right to be viewed as a leader. It is important to note that the co-founders of the “Women in Agriculture” non-profit organization have faced their

share of sanctions (loss of privilege) by speaking out against the problematic status quo treatment of women in the industry. Yet, in rejecting the disciplining and gatekeeping of women and their bodies, these women’s efforts to contest and defend privilege offer space for challenge and disruption—disruption that forces the industry to reckon with its history of “curiously strong prejudice” (Carter, 2016, p. 328) against women, and its equally problematic contemporary reverberations. Although they represent a very small proportion of the women interviewed for this research, we would argue that they are emblematic of a larger (albeit slow and uneven) shift among younger farmers and agricultural professionals (who often simultaneously occupy both those positions). This is evidenced by the proliferation and membership of “Women in Agriculture” groups across the Prairies, the popularity of agricultural conferences and training targeted at professional women in agriculture, as well as industry-level efforts to research and promote human diversity within the sector. Several of the participants in the fifty-five to sixty-four age range noted the shifts within their workplaces, including support for flexible work arrangements for *both* men and women with young families, as well as a general enthusiasm for supporting and mentoring young up-and-coming women with leadership potential. Changing policy and creating supportive and inclusive cultures requires a different approach than publicly naming outright sexism and refusing to follow the visible status quo, although both point to the shifting ground apparent in the industry. The women from “Women in Agriculture” appear to be a metaphorical megaphone for many of the shifts already rumbling throughout the industry.

Conclusion

In this paper we discussed women's accounts of their choices, experiences, and attitudes in agricultural leadership in the Canadian prairie provinces to illustrate the notion of respectable farm femininity. While this research is focussed on the Canadian prairie agriculture sector, we argue that it has relevance for jurisdictions elsewhere that are dominated by capitalist, industrialized agriculture. Much of the previous scholarship in this area is from regions outside of Canada (Alston et al., 2018; Alston, 2000; Liepens, 2000; Little, 2002; Pini, 2008; Whatmore, 1991), but there is a historic, political, geographic, and social likeness to the gendered issues presented here. This research may not reflect, nor be relevant to, women in agricultural leadership in the global South or sub-Saharan African agricultural sectors, however, gender has been well-studied in agriculture globally, and overwhelmingly tells a story of persistent (albeit lessening) gender inequality (Kozera-Kowalska & Uglis, 2021; Abdelali-Martini et al., 2003; Galiè et al., 2013). Scholars who study gender and agriculture in North America and Western Europe observe the ways in which agriculture is changing (e.g. technology, business management, human diversity) (Brandth, 2002), while illuminating how, despite these significant changes, certain types of rural, agricultural, hegemonic masculinities are constructed and maintained in the popular imagination (Alston, 2000). Our research findings are no exception. All the women who participated in the research were not afraid to speak of how much they loved their industry: the people, the work, and the impact they had on their communities. Further, as many of these agricultural organizations became increasingly professionalized, and as more women are joining the ranks of senior staff (although,

to be clear, this number is still quite low), things are slowly and incrementally changing.

Masculine farm credibility has a particular stronghold on the unwritten job requirements of professional women in the agriculture sector as it is used to confer and contest privilege. It is an added dimension of the already complicated minefield women must navigate in their organizational environment, a condition that is often beyond their control and sometimes not related to their actual job requirements. Our analysis focussed on an agriculture-specific tenet of the masculine stereotypes connected to leadership more broadly, while layering it onto the already established notions of respectable femininity that women feel pressure to enact as leaders, particularly in male dominated fields.

This research comes at a time when women in leadership has become a popular and debated topic within many agriculture circles in Canada. Amid this discourse, women are challenging and rejecting the antiquated and unfair discourses, processes and requirements that are assumed to be normative in the agriculture world. These challenges are sometimes minor (wearing “funky” shoes) and from the margins (non-profit), but they are undeniably gaining a foothold within the minds and hearts of women in all sectors and levels of agriculture. Women defend their privilege by insisting that their diligent work, professional skills, and strong relationships are key to their success and legitimacy as leaders, not their ability to drive a tractor, own a pickup truck, shovel manure, or endure a crop failure.

By drawing attention to and defining respectable farm femininity we have communicated its potential power in constraining women's inclusion and opportunities in the agricultural sector while at the

same time strengthening women's agency in becoming more aware of the antiquated and irrelevant logic on which it is based. Furthermore, without addressing the role of androcentrism in the intractable problems

related to food production, distribution, and consumption globally, solutions will be incomplete, as patriarchal structures will continue to be reproduced and thus, women will continue to be marginalized.

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