Why the future of farming is female

January 7 2020, by Sally Shortall

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Professor Sally Shortall, Duke of Northumberland Chair of Rural Economy at Newcastle University, explains why women are key to the survival of the farming industry.

"The lack of women in traditionally male-dominated industries,

particularly tech and engineering, dominates the news agenda at the moment and getting more young women to think about careers in these areas is a top priority for Government.

"In farming, the challenge isn't the number of women in the industry, it's changing the culture so that their voices can be heard.

"Women are significant contributors to the UK's agricultural industry and yet the work they do—ranging from working on the farms to supporting the families—is still undervalued and goes largely unseen.

Gender stereotypes

"Farms are imbued with gender stereotypes—sons inherit the land while women are invisible, with their enormous contribution to the farm rarely recognized. Scottish research found that over 80% of full and part-time working spouses on farms are women, while only 7% are recorded as the owner/ principal farmer.

"But the long-term survival of farming depends on making the most of every resource we have at our disposal and elevating the position, role and voice of women is going to be critical to making this happen.

"At the end of 2019, the Women in Agriculture Taskforce Report was launched by the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon.

"The Taskforce itself had been set up in response to the publication of a report I led on women in agriculture in Scotland. In keeping with the First Minister's commitment to gender equality, it was co-chaired by Minister Fergus Ewing, and Joyce Campbell, a successful sheep farmer, and had a gender equal composition.

"It was a really hard-working group and we had many vigorous debates

over our two years.

"Like women in other professions, women in agriculture are under-represented in farming organizations with few holding leadership positions. Women feel excluded and uncomfortable if they attend and don't always have access to the training they need because again it takes place in a very male space.

"The extent of men's exclusion of women and reluctance to vote for them to have positions in farming organizations was surprising, or at least, the lack of change in these views was surprising.

"The Scottish Government asked for a focus on new entrant women to farming. This group were particularly dynamic. They were cutting edge, risk takers, and very hard workers. Mostly they were renting land, which meant that they and their partners had other jobs as well and were very committed to farming.

"The Taskforce has recommended various short and long term measures to increase and enhance equality in agriculture. Research has shown that diversity increases business success and the objective is to achieve a better Scottish industry.

"In 2018, the Government committed £150,000 for training for women in agriculture. The programs were massively over-subscribed and when he laid the report before Parliament at the end of November, Minister Ewing committed a further £300,000 to achieving the Taskforce recommendations over two years, including leadership training for women to take more prominent positions in the industry.

"The Scottish Government is serious about implementing change. It has established an Equality Charter for the industry and progress will be carefully monitored.

"Having researched women in agriculture for over thirty years, it is heartening to see a Government and industry committed to enacting change. It will take time. There are no legal barriers to women owning land or participating in organizations, but there are huge cultural barriers. The Scottish Government is acting on the research findings and implementing strategies to bring about change. This will lead to greater gender equality and a better agricultural industry."

Provided by Newcastle University

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