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## **Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs Involved in Agritourism**

### **Introduction**

A myriad of problems affecting farm income and profitability are compelling farmers to supplement their livelihoods with non-agricultural activities and off-farm employment (Barbieri and Mshenga 2008). Agritourism, defined as “farming related activities carried out on a working farm or other agricultural settings for entertainment or education purposes” (Gil Arroyo, Barbieri, and Rich 2013) is one of these emerging livelihood strategies for farmers (Barbieri and Mshenga 2008; Schmitt 2010). Women play pivotal roles in developing, maintaining and innovating agritourism enterprises (McGehee, Kim, and Jennings 2007) and various other farm value-added activities (e.g., food preserves, crafts, quilts) complementary to agritourism (Barbieri and Mshenga 2008).

In spite of the active contribution of women in agritourism, studies show that women operators earn significantly less than male ones; the average difference in the U.S. was over US\$35,000 per year (Barbieri and Mshenga 2008). However, little research has specifically explored the obstacles women agritourism entrepreneurs face in conducting their businesses (McGehee 2007). To respond to this knowledge gap, we conducted a study to identify the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs involved in farming and agritourism in North Carolina (NC).

### **Literature Review:**

Entrepreneurial women face challenges inherent to their multifaceted livelihoods. These challenges are exacerbated when their entrepreneurial efforts are related to farming due to the complexity of the agricultural industry. Our literature review unearthed several challenges that tend to affect the success of women entrepreneurs in general, as well as another mix of challenges affecting female farmers.

One of the biggest hurdles women entrepreneurs face in comparison with their male counterparts arise out of their lower access to financial resources (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004; Coleman, 2000; Ragasa, 2012; Winn 2005) to start (Carter and Rosa 1998) and grow (Still and Walker 2006) their businesses. A related challenge women entrepreneurs report is a difficulty in accessing business networks which limits their access to information and training opportunities, establish strategic partnerships and enter new markets (McClelland, Swail, & Ibbotson, 2005; McKay, 2001; Still and Walker 2006; Winn 2005). When working in farming, such challenge is more pronounced due to the difficulty in accessing adequate tools and technology to increase their production (Doss 2001; Ragasa 2012) and to transport their products to markets (Quisumbing and Pandolfelli 2010).

Women’s traditional family roles are often identified as a challenge because of the pressure family members tend to exert on them to not compromise their family obligations in favor of running their businesses (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004), pressure that is more evident in rural societies

(Ogunlela & Mukhtar, 2009). Women entrepreneurs operating in markedly patriarchal settings, such as farming, may also face complex structural barriers such as discrimination from suppliers, buyers and even their business associates (Godwin, Stevens, & Brenner, 2006). This challenging environment diminishes women entrepreneurs' credibility (Gundry, Ben-Yoseph, and Posig 2002), which often leads to negative self-perception and isolation (Shragg, Yacuk, and Glass 1992).

Women farmers also experience challenges associated with the patriarchal structure of farming. In this regards, the most pressing challenge women farmers face is unequal land rights (Ogunlela and Mukhtar 2009), a problem that is even present in societies ruled by gender-equal legal systems. For example, it has been reported that although American women can legally inherit land from their parents or as widows, farmers tend to pass family farmland to male offspring (Salamon 1995; Salamon, Gengenbacher, and Penas 1986). This patriarchal structure is also evident in the institutional support system which is dominated by male extension agents (Ragasa 2012; Puskur 2013).

### **Research Methods:**

Given the limited information available on challenges affecting women farmers involved in agritourism, we used a mix of qualitative methods to explore challenges to their success. Namely, we conducted group interviews following a nominal group technique, and we conducted individual in-depth semi-structured interviews. Fieldwork occurred during October and November of 2015 in select counties of North Carolina's Coast, Piedmont and Mountains. We conducted either group interview or focus group in each of the three regions, and 10 individual interviews across the state. A total of 20 women involved in agritourism participated in this study.

We audio recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim and subsequently coded them in QSR\*NVIVO 10. We used thematic coding to capture themes emerging from the data. Depending on the participants' discussions, if a sentence or a paragraph was coded once under a theme, it was counted as one. Once the open coding was complete to code all the data, each theme received a total number. During the process, the researcher kept memos and field notes to ensure credibility by means of reflexivity (Henderson 2006). To ensure confirmability of the coding and interpretation, we used peer debriefing among three of the co-authors (Spillet 2003). These co-authors, two women and one man, were actively involved in the fieldwork, and have personal knowledge as practitioners and consultants in agriculture and agritourism. To ensure the anonymity of our respondents, we denote quotes by a combination of numbers (X.XX) and letters indicating the data generation method; FG for focus group or group interview and INT for individual interview. The first number corresponds to the chronological order of the focus group, group or individual interview while the second number corresponds to the participants' chronological order.

Participating women have diverse agritourism, farming, and demographic profiles. All participants are involved in farming as a source of livelihood; five of them hold additional day-jobs and seven pursue farming and agritourism as their retirement career. They are involved in a wide variety agricultural activities such as specialty crop farming, orchards, raising small-stock and livestock for meat, dairy and fiber production. The types of agritourism experiences they offer include farm

tours, picking-your-own produce, non-game fishing, private campgrounds, farm-stays, corn mazes and hayrides, hosting events, and selling a wide range of agricultural products (e.g., meat, eggs, vegetables) and value added products (e.g. jam, cider, ice-cream, donuts etc.).

**Study Findings:**

Overall, 11 challenges affecting women’s success in agritourism emerged from our study. Findings reveal that apart from managing growth and ensuring farm perpetuation, the rest of the challenges appear across the life-cycle stages of our study participants (Table 1). The most prominent challenge is “*Lacking reliable staff*”. Women entrepreneurs express frustration in not being able to find and retain reliable staff due to a general shortage of reliable and skilled workers. This is particularly problematic owing to the seasonal nature of most of these businesses. Lack of staff adds to the entrepreneurs’ burden of work, keeps them from investing in long-term planning for the farm as well as diverting their attention to actual expansion, hindering their capacity to harness the growth potential of the farm. One of our participants, who runs her own corn maze and hayride agritourism operation with her elderly father, delineates her inability to pay adequate attention to certain tasks “I wish...I could afford to hire somebody to do some of the stuff that I haven’t taken care of for a long time, with me being spread so thin in so many different areas” [INT-5.15].

**Table 1: Occurrences of challenges across the life-cycle of women in agritourism**

Challenges of women in agritourism	Number of Occurrences	Life Cycle		
		20’s-30’s	40’s-50’s	60’s-70’s
Lacking reliable staff	124	√	√	√
Managing growth	103		√	√
Lacking institutional support	87	√	√	√
Ensuring farm perpetuation	82			√
Keeping up with pluriactive role	74	√	√	√
Facing new challenges constantly	67	√	√	√
Not being embraced as real farmers	53	√	√	√
Having limited access to resources	51	√	√	√
Dealing with gender norms	50	√	√	√
Having inconvenient location	49	√	√	√
Balancing demand of livelihood with traditional roles	36	√	√	√

Another prominent challenge is “*Managing growth*”, which is expressed as women’s difficulty to maintain desired quality, find adequate staff, and manage liability issues while growing their business; for some also meant their ability to manage growth with aging. Participants are especially concerned with maintaining quality of products and services as a priority and they are hesitant to allow the agritourism operation to grow to a point where they are no longer able to personally ensure the quality of offerings. Most of the entrepreneurs feel that critical liability threats emerge when new products and services are added to their operation, and they are uncertain about their ability to acquire the required insurance coverage. A retired school teacher who now manages an

orchard offering a wide variety of recreational activities said “We’ve got to look at what we’ve got and what we’ve added; do we need more insurance if we add this” [INT-9.19].

“*Lacking institutional support for agritourism*” is another prominent concern, as participants often feel a lack of state effort in fostering their business growth and in encouraging and educating the public about agritourism. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that agritourism is often not recognized as agriculture, the presence of ambiguous regulations, and the inconsistent support from relevant associations. One elderly farmer in fiber production, who offers farm tours puts it succinctly:

“Our national association has taken a turn and they’re really focusing on marketing the end product, but that’s definitely the commercial market. They’re forgetting about us little guys and that’s going to kind of bother me too” [INT-3.11].

Our study notes the challenge of “*Ensuring farm perpetuation in the family*” among the participants especially in face of the next generation’s lack of interest in farming. The study participants point out that farm succession is crucial to ensure the financial stability and success of the farm so as to encourage the next generation’s involvement. An elderly participant who is currently involved in agritourism full-time, with two adult children, none of whom is interested in taking up farming in the future said:

“How do you keep that in the family that land? And it’s been in my husband’s family since the mid 1800’s. What’s going to happen after our generation? Because none of the ...children...have no desire” [FG-1.3].

These entrepreneurs struggle with “*Keeping-up with their pluriactive livelihoods*” as they feel that in addition to carrying out the bulk of their agritourism business’ workload, many maintain day-jobs in instances, and they always have extensive daily agricultural tasks. One entrepreneur who runs her agritourism operation mostly by herself describes her situation as:

“I do this all by myself. I am planting. I come up with the design. I do every aspect of this business. It’s me! I’m conducting the field trips. I’m at the ticket window when people come up to pay on Saturday” [INT-5.15].

The pluriactivity effect is worsened with women’s struggle to “*Balancing the demands of their livelihoods with the traditional roles*” expected of them. In particular, participants report their inability to fulfill expectations of caring for their family, and a lack of cooperation from their husbands. One entrepreneur with a chronic illness expresses her challenge as “For me personally it’s just been now the amount that I have to take on versus you know husband’s willing to take on” [INT-3.12].

As most of these farmers are non-traditional (non-commodity) farmers working on smaller scale operations, they complain of often “*Not being embraced as real farmers*”. Being women, and young as some pointed out, often puts them at an even more disadvantageous position. Participants feel isolated because there are very few women farmers, and they find it difficult to collaborate with male farmers. One woman farmer who is in her 60’s, involved in specialty crop farming for 15 years now says “Historically men have owned farms and run farms. There’s not a critical mass of female farmers yet to make this happen” [FG-1.5].

*“Facing new challenges constantly”* in the form of weather uncertainty, unexpected calamities (from factors beyond their control), agritourism seasonality, and inexplicable loss of crops, is a recurrent burden on participants. One farmer who faced significant loss in her first year of business due to road closure expresses her concern “...that was the year of the rockslide on Highway 64 at Oakley Gorge. So this road was closed for six months. That was very difficult” [INT-10.20]. Few women also add recent loss of family members, who used to be actively involved in the farm operation, as their ongoing challenge.

Women agritourism entrepreneurs also complain about *“Having limited access to important resources”*, mainly in the form of financial shortcomings and apprehension of getting into debt that might compromise their business. One agritourism provider who is single and runs the farm without any family help describes her monetary constraint as “I do not borrow money. If I don’t have money I don’t do it” [FG-2.2]. Participants also report lack of information on other critical issues. For example, they find it difficult to price their products in face of competition from wholesale and chain retailers and the increasing input prices caused by subsidies. One of our elderly participants in her 60’s and the entrepreneur of an herb farm expressed difficulty of accessing market information for pricing “...we have the challenge of pricing our products all the time. You know! Where do you find what is a good base....?” [FG-1.3]

Participating women also feel they are *“Dealing with gender norms that limit their potential as entrepreneurs”*. They explain that visitors have a limited understanding of the demands of farming and their communities are uncooperative because men have historically maintained a primary role in agriculture and women are primarily expected to be caregivers. One farmer who has to divide her time between caring for her child with chronic illness and running the agritourism business expresses her frustration:

“...most people think that I am just a mother. And a lot of men come up here to speak with my husband and I’ll say, he’s not here, can I help you and they will say, well I need to talk to you husband about buying” [INT-1.6].

Participants report that *“Having an inconvenient or even remote location of their farms”* significantly hinders their capacity to reach markets. They note that the state is not doing enough to help alleviate this problem, especially by failing to provide good signage. One young mother of a one-year old, who has to travel far to get to a processing plant for her livestock describes her situation “It’s the inconvenience and the fact that they want enough famers or there’s not enough in this area to keep a processing plant around here. We don’t have what we need in this area” [FG-1.1].

## **Discussion**

This paper builds on the literature examining challenges faced by women farmers and by women entrepreneurs. Four challenges confirm existing literature (i.e., not being embraced as farmers, having limited access to resources, dealing with gender norms, balancing demand of livelihood with traditional roles), while six are emerging and not previously documented in the literature (e.g., lacking reliable staff, managing growth, ensuring farm perpetuation, keeping up with pluriactive role, facing new challenges constantly, having inconvenient location) and one (e.g., lacking institutional support) expand the existing literature (Table 2). Findings show that managing growth

as a challenge was not prevalent among young women, while perpetuating the family farm only occurred later in women’s life-cycle. This could be because young women are still focusing on building their businesses and are not concerned about unmanageable level of growth. In contrast, older women, who generally had adult children capable of taking over the farm in the future, may have a clearer picture of the future of their farm as retirement is fast approaching. So, perpetuation becomes a concern as women agripreneurs become older and start to think about farm in their absence.

Much like literature suggesting that female entrepreneurs tend to suffer from lack of credibility (Gundry, Ben-Yoseph, and Posig, 2002; Shragg, Yacuk, and Glass, 1992), our study reveals that women farmers offering agritourism also face a lack of acceptance among mainstream farmers, who are generally men and operating on a much larger scale. The lower number of women farmers and the lack of respect by support institutions aggravate the women entrepreneurs’ sense of isolation and neglect.

**Table 2: Existing literature in relation to women’s challenges**

Themes in Women’s Challenges	Emerging	Confirming	Expanding
Lacking reliable staff	√		
Managing growth	√		
Lacking institutional support			√
Ensuring farm perpetuation	√		
Keeping up with pluriactive role	√		
Facing new challenges constantly	√		
Not being embraced as farmers		√	
Having limited access to resources		√	
Dealing with gender norms		√	
Having inconvenient location	√		
Balancing demand of livelihood with traditional roles			√

Another challenge in support of literature is the limited access to resources available to women farmers (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio, 2004; Doss, 2001; Gundry, Ben-Yoseph, and Posig, 2002; Quisumbing and Pandolfelli, 2010; Quisumbing, 1994; Ragasa, 2012 Winn 2005). Our study generates additional support to this observation, and extended it beyond farming and into the women’s agritourism activity. In their farming activity, women expressed difficulty in finding reliable suppliers for ensuring cost efficiency and profitability of their enterprises. And in their agritourism activity women noted that visitors often lack education about the demands of farming and expected them and their farm to be always visitor-ready.

Women entrepreneurs have long wrestled with juggling traditional roles with their professional activity (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio, 2004; McClelland, Swail, Bell, and Ibbotson, 2005). We find evidence of this challenge among women agritourism entrepreneurs, who seemed to be

pursuing this activity against pressures of their families. Husbands often emerge as important culprits by focusing only on farming and agritourism tasks that they deemed desirable and leaving many other tasks and most demands of family life to the women.

The literature documents that women entrepreneurs and farmers often face structural barriers caused by unequal access to land, income and property (McKay, 2001). In this study, participants express difficulty in acquiring and maintaining land, but this problem appears to be not unique for women. Most of the studies examining the challenges faced by women farmers were set in developing countries with extant gender biased legal structures, even if they may have a difficulty in exerting them (Doss, 2001; McClelland, Swail, Bell, and Ibbotson, 2005; Ogunlela and Mukhtar 2009). We find that in North Carolina, women enjoy identical legal rights but they still mention that they face difficulty in accessing grants which usually go to well-established businesses driven by men or accessing networks which again are male dominated. These findings provide us with an understanding that although these women may not necessarily feel marginalized, they continuously have to push through prevalent gender hegemony to pursue their entrepreneurial livelihoods.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The challenges that women in agritourism face are the amalgamation of their challenges as farmers, as entrepreneurs, and simply as professional women. This study responds to the general scarcity of research on women in agritourism, specifically exploring their challenges. In doing so, the findings of this study advance our scholarly understanding of the challenges that these women face and may serve to informing policy. As a practical implication, the challenges identified in this study can be used to design targeted skill-building programs. To address this, we propose a two-fold awareness initiative. Firstly, there is need to create a collective narrative that communicates the contribution of the women-led businesses. Women in agritourism should take up a proactive role to delineate the multitude of benefits their businesses bring to the surrounding communities. Secondly, there is need to establish a two-way communication between these women and the support agencies, such as agritourism associations and extension services. By providing a platform for collaboration and knowledge sharing among these women, these agencies could foster advancement of agritourism businesses.

This study provided in-depth insights into the underexplored issue of challenges faced by women involved in farming and agritourism. The study has limited capacity to produce results that can be generalizable to all women agritourism entrepreneurs in North Carolina and beyond; therefore, we call for representative quantitative studies to capture this issue at scale in North Carolina and in other regions. Having set the preliminary understanding of challenges, the following step is to gain a better understanding of how agritourism women can overcome these challenges.

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