



Testing the Women Landowner Conservation Learning Circle Model

A summary of interviews with resource professionals



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Introduction

American Farmland Trust (AFT) is an organization whose mission is to “save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land” (American Farmland Trust 2018). In 2012, AFT expanded their initiative to focus on women in agriculture after recognizing the work of the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) to initiate women’s conservation learning circles in Iowa through a program called “Women Caring for the Land” (Eells & Soulis, 2013).

The goal of conservation learning circles is to educate, support, connect, and empower women landowners to overcome the gendered challenges they experience as landowners. With the support of a USDA¹ Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) in 2012, WFAN worked with AFT and several other agricultural organizations to expand and test the learning circle model across seven Midwestern states. In 2017, AFT began working with Wood County Soil and Water Conservation District (Wood

1. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is an agency that promotes agricultural production and the conservation of our nation’s natural resources (USDA, n.d.).



SWCD²) in Ohio and the Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service/Northwest New York Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Team (Cornell) to test the model in the Great Lakes Region.

NRCS³ has an outreach mandate to ensure all potential participants are aware of their programs and services. A targeted goal of the agency is to reach women who own or operate land. Another important audience is nonoperating landowners, so the partnership with AFT and WFAN to host learning circles was a welcomed opportunity. Other important conservation partners, such as SWCD's, USDA Farm Service Agency, and USDA Cooperative Extension Service, have similar goals and serve similar customers. In Indiana, NRCS was instrumental in establishing Women4theLand.⁴ This group is made up of representatives of the Indiana Conservation Partnership who work

together to conduct women's conservation learning circles.

All partners agree that the benefits of these learning circles are clearly transferable and have been expanding the use of the method since then. Learning circles are or have been held in 15 states since 2012.

In a previous report we detailed the conservation learning circle methodology, research methods, findings, and conclusions from the interviews of women non-operating landowners in Illinois and Indiana (Fairchild et al. 2018). In this report, we detail the perspectives of women who were involved as professional resource staff at the learning circles in Illinois and Indiana (2014 to 2017) and included professional staff involved in Ohio and New York learning circles (2017 to 2018).

2. Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) work to “bring a widespread understanding of the needs of soil and water conservation” (Texas State Soil & Water Conservation Board, n.d.).

3. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a USDA agency that provides financial and technical assistance for farmers and ranchers to implement conservation practices (Natural Resources Conservation Service, n.d.).

4. Women4theLand is a program initiated by the Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN) and sponsored by the Indiana Conservation Partnership that hosts women's conservation learning circles to “better serve women landowners and operators to manage and improve their land” in Indiana (Women4theLand, n.d.).

The “Conservation Learning Circle” Methodology

We interviewed staff involved in a total of 53 learning circles held from 2014–2018. This includes 13 learning circles in Illinois, 31 learning circles in Indiana, 5 learning circles in New York and 4 learning circles in Ohio. The majority of the meetings focused on soil health. Other topics included conservation planning, leasing and communicating with your renter,⁵ forestry, pollinator habitat and legacy planning with conservation in mind. At a typical learning circle meeting, a group of 12–20 women landowners who own land in or near the area gather at a public meeting place. The meeting room is set up with tables in a circular or rectangular shape, so the women are able to face one another and there is no obvious “head of the table”. A trained female facilitator leads the meeting and helps direct the discussion, and female conservation professionals provide technical content. The facilitator and staff sit among the group and during introductions the facilitator and staff introduce themselves personally as well as professionally. These peer learning techniques put everyone in equal standing which encourages open discussion and questions. The emphasis is on respectful listening, equal time for expressing thoughts and concerns, and sharing wisdom among the members of the group, including—but not limited to—the conservation professionals (WFAN, 2018).

Each learning circle followed the same general format as outlined in the Women Caring for the Land curriculum manual.⁶ They are

day-long events, 9:00 am–3:00 pm, and are generally exclusive to women during the morning discussion.⁷ Before any information or resources are mentioned, each individual (regardless of whether they are a staffer or a landowner—and often staff are both) is given about 3 minutes to introduce herself, tell a bit about her farm, and why she came to the learning circle. Individuals are encouraged to share any issues they are having trouble resolving and/or ultimate goals or dreams for their land. This lengthy introductory period is an integral part of the meeting and sets the tone for the entire day. It establishes an equal, peer-to-peer framework and a relaxed, conversational feel to the meeting. Staff are coached before the meeting to share a bit of their personal story as well—for example, if they are not from a farming background, what brought them into farming as a career? This activity establishes the women as the experts and decision makers on their own land—a role they are not often accustomed to playing. It is typical for the women to open up as they feel more comfortable, sharing their values, their personal stories, relating to each other about how difficult the transition to ownership has been (often it involves the sudden death of a spouse or parent, or a long illness). They will sometimes discuss barriers they have had to overcome related to gender—for example, farm advisors or farmers renting from them not taking them or their questions seriously. While the conversation does not linger on these complaints, it is important for the women to feel like they are in a space where it is safe to

5. We use the term ‘renter’ throughout our report to denote the farm operator renting land from the women landowners, but some of the women staff may use the term ‘tenant.’

6. Available at <http://www.wfan.org/our-programs/women-caring-for-the-landsm/curriculum-manual/>.

7. While we strive to keep the meetings women only in the morning, we have made exceptions when the resource professional we think we would be the most beneficial to have at the meeting is male, or when a male landowner has specifically asked if he can attend, knowing the meetings are intended for women. Our goal is to create an environment where making women feel comfortable is the priority.

share these difficulties—and share solutions to the difficulties.

Following a short break, the meeting resumes with a technical discussion. For the soil health topic, which was the most common topic, the discussion focuses on what soil is and what it means to be healthy, with a particular focus on the importance of a diverse soil microbiome. The discussion is interactive, using visual aids (e.g., the soil itself), demonstrations, and props to teach the concepts. Complex and technical information is presented, but great care is taken to use plain language, avoiding jargon and overly technical terms. The goal is not to try to explain EVERYTHING about soil in just one sitting, but to inspire curiosity to learn more. Learning outcomes for a soil health learning circle are to understand: 1) what soil is, 2) how it can be described by its physical, chemical and biological properties, 3) that soil is a living food web powered by the sun, and 4) that soil can be managed for both agricultural productivity and environmental performance.

After the technical discussion, lunch and a networking break occurs, lasting from 30–60 minutes depending on how far the group will travel for the field tour. At the lunch break male resource professionals who will join on the field tour may be invited. While we strive for a women-only morning discussion, the women

also need to know who their local resource people are, regardless of gender.

The field tour is intended to cement learning from the morning—enabling the women to see practices on the ground that farmers are using to promote soil health. The tour begins with shared transportation, which is another key best practice. Travel occurs via a school bus or 15-passenger van, which encourages further networking. Landowners will often take advantage of this time to query resource professionals individually about specific issues relevant to them. The field tour begins with an informal presentation by the landowner and/or farmer whose land is being visited. An attempt is made to visit women-owned farms and encourage the landowner and farmer to talk about how they communicate, and how they work together on conservation practices. Resource professionals are coached to present technical information about the practices the women are seeing in interactive ways and, again, using plain language.

The day wraps up with a return to the meeting location. Attendees are asked to fill out evaluations, and the learning circle ends with a brief discussion asking the attendees for any “a-ha” moments they had during the day and any actions they intend to take when they go home. This further cements the learning throughout the day.

Methods

The research method used for this evaluative study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women staff members who have been involved in the organization of these women's conservation learning circles. Most often their role was in either a facilitator, coordinator, or organizer role, but could also include those who were involved as a presenter, steering committee member, agency representative, or demonstrator. All of the women we interviewed were involved with meetings located in either Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, or New York.

A list of women staff from 2014 to 2018 was provided to Utah State University researchers with emails and telephone contact information.⁸ In June 2018, an email was sent to each of the women staff from Jennifer Filipiak, AFT's Midwest Director (who facilitated a majority

of the learning circles) and from Heather Bacher, the State Coordinator with Indiana's Women4theLand. Staff were informed of the purpose of the study and provided notice that they would be contacted by a Ph.D. student (the first author of this report) at Utah State University via email or telephone in the upcoming weeks to schedule a telephone interview. The email gave the women the opportunity to reply directly to Filipiak or Bacher to schedule an interview. If they replied, the first author was informed, who then sent a follow-up email to schedule a phone interview.

For those women who did not respond to the initial email, the first author attempted to reach them two more times via email (for a maximum of three attempts). The second and third wave of emails took place between June and August 2018. If there were three failed attempts via



8. Not every staff member provided information for each of these contact modes, but a majority were provided and/or could be obtained through an internet search.

email, but a telephone number was provided, the first author initiated contact through phone, with a maximum of three attempts made. These three waves of telephone calls were made between August and November 2018. In all instances, voicemails were left if there was no answer. When the participant was reached, some women were willing to be interviewed immediately, while in other situations interviews were scheduled for an upcoming date and time. Prior to the interview, respondents were informed of the study's purpose through the use of an Informed Consent document. Respondents were asked to respond with their verbal or written consent to the terms of the study, including to be voice recorded. All of the women in this study consented to being recorded. Each woman was asked interview questions contained in the Appendix.

We had many women who told us that they were unable to participate because they simply did not have the time. Therefore, we decided to provide the women a final opportunity to submit their responses over email, sending the women who had not responded to email and telephone requests, an email with the interview questions attached. This resulted in two additional participants.

A total of 49 women's names were provided. Thirty-four participants agreed to be interviewed, for a 69% response rate.

Using the interview transcripts, we coded data into dominant themes (Aronson, 1994). We reviewed the coding and discussed and resolved any discrepancies among the coding. When changes in coding were made, we reviewed previously coded material to ensure it was coded consistently (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). We first provide information on staff demographics and the number of learning circles they have participated in. We then discuss the women's reflections on the learning circles with data on whether they felt the meeting was successful and their observations, what they liked most about the meeting, what they would recommend doing differently, and if there are any other conservation topics that would be good to explore at future meetings. Next, we provide information on whether they made any new contacts from the meeting, whether landowners contacted them with questions, if those landowners enrolled in any conservation programs or requested any kind of technical assistance, and if so, which practices were adopted. We then ask the women to describe which barriers they identify as impacting women landowners' ability to care for their land. Lastly, we determine whether the women are interested in participating in more conservation learning circles in the future and what they hope to see as a result of these meetings.

Findings

Demographics

Local SWCD's were the employers of many of our respondents (38%, n=13). The second most common agency that 32% (n=11) of our respondents are employed at is the NRCS. Twenty-four percent (n=8) of our respondents came from other organizations such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA),⁹ Farm Service Agency (FSA),¹⁰ or other local agricultural agencies. The remaining two respondents (6%) are employed with Cooperative Extension Service.¹¹

Various demographic data was collected and is contained in Table 1. The ages of the women staff range from 25 to 66 years. The average age of our respondents is 44 years. The women were asked how long they have been employed at their respective agency. We soon realized that this question elicited two different responses, so we asked the women not only how long they have been at the agency, but how many years they have been in their current role. The average time the women have been employed at their agency is 15 years, and the average time in their current role is 9 years. The range of the time spent at their agency is between less than one year and 34 years, and the time in their current role ranges from less than one year to 31 years.

TABLE 1: RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

	AVERAGE OR PERCENTAGE (N)
Agency Employed (N=34)	
• SWCD	38% (n=13)
• NRCS	32% (n=11)
• Other	24% (n=8)
• Extension	6% (n=2)
Age (N=33)	44, Range 25-66 years
Years Employed at Agency (N=33)	15, Range 0.5-34 years
Years in Current Role (N=33)	9, Range 0.5-31 years
Education (N=33)	
• Some college	3% (n=1)
• Associates Degree	9% (n=3)
• Bachelors	55% (n=18)
• Masters	27% (n=9)
• Ph.D.	6% (n=2)

(One respondent preferred not to answer demographic questions.)

All of our respondents have an education level of at least some college. A majority of the women have a Bachelor's degree (55%, n=18), with a Master's degree being the second most common response (27%, n=9).

Information on learning circle participation

To gain a better understanding of the women's involvement in the learning circles, they were

9. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is a federal agency dedicated to "protect human health and the environment" (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

10. Farm Service Agency (FSA) is a USDA agency whose mission is "equitably serving all farmers, ranchers, and agricultural partners through the delivery of effective, efficient agricultural programs for all Americans" (Farm Service Agency, n.d.).

11. Cooperative Extension Service works to "empower farmers, ranchers, and communities of all sizes to meet the challenges they face, adapt to changing technology, improve nutrition and food safety, prepare for and respond to emergencies, and protect our environment" (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.).

asked how many learning circles they have participated in and their role in the learning circles (Table 2). Most (85%, n=28) had been involved with more than one learning circle. The remaining (15%, n=5) had been involved with one learning circle. Their roles also varied but most were involved as either a facilitator (35%, n=12), or as an organizer/coordinator (21%, n=7). Other roles that these women encompass include: steering committee member, planner, agency representative, and presenter.

TABLE 2: LEARNING CIRCLE PARTICIPATION

	PERCENTAGES (N)
Number of Learning Circles Attended (N=33)	
● More than one	85% (n=28)
● One	15% (n=5)
Role of Staff (N=34)	
● Facilitator	35% (n=12)
● Organizer/Coordinator	21% (n=7)
● Steering Committee Member	9% (n=3)
● Planner	9% (n=3)
● Agency Representative	9% (n=3)
● Presenter	6% (n=2)
● Other	12% (n=4)

Observations on the 'success' of these meetings

The women staff were asked whether they felt the meeting was successful in engaging women farmland owners or operators in conservation topics. Overwhelmingly, the women staff felt the meetings have been a success, with 88% (n=30) stating an affirmative 'yes.' The remaining women, 12% (n=4), said they have been somewhat successful, either highlighting that every meeting is different or that it is dependent on how well the meeting has been planned out (Table 3).

TABLE 3: SUCCESS OF MEETING (N=34)

	PERCENTAGES (N)
Yes, successful	88% (n=30)
Somewhat successful	12% (n=4)

As one woman staff member stated, *"The women are excited. They're actually calling in wanting to know when our next one is and they're, they're feeling more comfortable coming in and asking questions.... So it has increased these women feeling more comfortable and coming into the office to find out about conservation."* Another staff member described both the women's engagement during the meetings and continued attendance at further meetings as her measure of success. *"The women, they were engaging, they were talking, they were sharing ideas. There were repeat people there, which is good because we captured their attention once. They came for a second one because we must've done something right the first time."*

Most useful aspect of learning circle

We were also interested in knowing what the women staff thought was the most useful aspect of the meetings. We received a wide range of responses, but the top three include: (1) the learning circle format (44%, n=15); (2) meeting other women, hearing and learning from their experiences (38%, n=13); and (3) the manner of presenting agricultural material (12%, n=4) (Table 4).¹²

TABLE 4: MOST USEFUL ASPECTS OF THE LEARNING CIRCLES (N=34)

TOP 3 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
Learning circle format	44% (n=15)
Meeting other women, hearing and learning from their experiences	38% (n=13)
Manner of presenting agricultural material	12% (n=4)

12. The count provided include any respondent who indicated these aspects as their #1 or #2 pick.



Those who spoke of the learning circle format mentioned that they specifically liked the introduction portion of the meeting. One staff member stated, *“Probably my favorite part of the meeting is when everybody goes around and introduces themselves because in almost every person you could find something that connects you to that person.”* For other staff members, it was the informal nature of the learning circles. One woman said, *“I like that we do not do formal presentations,”* while another respondent stated in her email response that she liked the *“casual setting.”*

This aspect of the learning circles was closely followed by the opportunities for meeting other women, hearing and learning from their experiences. Staff members mentioned that they liked how the women were able to share their experiences, feel comfortable, and interact with women in a similar situation. One staff member describes the women sharing their experiences by saying, *“As an outsider looking in, I would say there would be value in the networking that happens. Sometimes the ladies that attend know somebody else. Sometimes they come and they*

don’t know anybody else. There’s also, you know, multiple generations. So there might be [someone] who I would call maybe like the matriarch of a family who has been farming for 50 years, who is able to talk to someone who just inherited a farm and is trying to figure out how to talk to her renter. So the interactions between, the potential for the networking and the information that they can get from each other I would say would be valuable.” Another staff member stated, *“I do think it’s very good community building with the women for them to interact with each other and building that relationship early. Building a comfort level to know they’re not alone.”*

The third aspect of the meeting most liked by the staff was the manner of presenting agricultural material. Out of the 12% (n=4) of respondents who identified this, one respondent stated, *“I just thought they had some very good information for them [the women attendees], and it was brought down to a level so that they could understand it. So, you know, how sometimes you go to meetings and they get professors or whatever and they talk over you. And I thought the speakers that they had there really*

tried talking to you, not at you, or above you.” Another staff member said, “The speakers were good. They spoke on the level that just the lady landowner that’s new to a lot of the agricultural practices we were talking about Some people could get way over their heads, we were careful to pick speakers who would speak and engage with people and interact and there was a lot of conversation, which I love about the circle. It wasn’t just presentations.”

The results in Table 4 were consistent among all women staff, regardless of whether they attended one or more than one meeting. In addition, the top two responses were consistent across agency affiliations. Over half of the SWCD (54%, n=7) and NRCS (55%, n=6) women staff identified the learning circle format as the aspect they liked most, with meeting other women, hearing and learning from their experiences as the second most commonly liked aspect. For Other staff, these preferences were swapped with meeting other women, hearing and learning from their experiences being the aspect most liked (63%, n=5). Only one of the two Extension staff mentioned this category, and neither identified the learning circle format.

Recommendations for improvements

The women were asked whether there is anything regarding the meetings they would recommend doing differently. Thirty-two percent (n=11) did not have any suggestions for improvement and would not do anything differently. For those who did have recommendations, the three most common responses included: (1) expanded curriculum (21%, n=7); (2) format changes (15%, n=5); and (3) changes to the meeting time (12%, n=4) (Table 5).¹³

TABLE 5: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE MEETINGS (N=34)

TOP 3 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
Expanded curriculum	21% (n=7)
Format changes	15% (n=5)
Meeting time changes	12% (n=4)
No suggestions	32% (n=11)

The most common response were those women who suggested an expanded curriculum. One staff member said, “The criteria that I have that I was trained on is all soil health stuff. Which is great, cause a lot of the things, the topics that people want to discuss are something we tie into soil health, but it would be great to have curriculum for like pollinators or forestry or livestock. I just feel like right now I’m limited on what kind of curriculum I have and then I have to be creative on how I tie it into these more specific topics.” Another respondent suggested, “I would like to be able to expand some of the topics that we touch on. I know we are basing this on conservation, and I don’t have a problem with that ‘cause that’s what we do, that’s our job, that’s what we want to see happen. But I think there is a need to hit some other topics that so far, you know, are kind of off the table for us.”

For those who suggested format changes, some described how they thought the meetings might be too structured. One staff member stated, “They’ve been quite structured and, and the time is full. So there isn’t a lot of open, getting to know each other time. And I mentioned how everybody connects, but if you don’t have the time to really turn to the people next to you and, and reach across the table and have that conversation time, you don’t, you know, you don’t really connect all the way.” Other women staff would like to tweak the programs to the interests of their attendees. In the words of one staff member, “I think that sometimes programs need to be tailored and tweaked just a little bit more depending on the

13. The count provided include any respondent who indicated these aspects as their #1 or #2 pick.

group that's there. And I think that that's hard, having trained facilitators that are not from that area... and sometimes there's a little bit of a struggle with that... facilitators want to do it a certain way and they're trained in the curriculum, and the curriculum's to be done a certain way [and] there were suggestions and strong encouragement to do certain things that are programmed a certain way. And I guess I kind of spoke back and said, 'You know, I just really know these women really well and that's not going to work for them.' And so I think a little more about flexibility in working with those facilitators, your coordinators of the event in these areas really do know those people, and that area, and that situation best. So I think that was a little bit of a struggle. I understand, of course, that they're trying to use a certain curriculum, but sometimes I think we know best for our situation. Sometimes it just needs tweaked a little differently."

Those suggesting meeting time changes felt the time of year, day, or length of the meetings may need to be adjusted to better suit the women attendees. One staff member mentioned she plans to implement this change for a future meeting to determine if it is more convenient for the women. "One of the things we're going to try out is a different time of day... many of the landowners not only own land, but they may still be employed. And even though they're non-operating landowners, if you have a full-time job it's hard to get away to get to an event. So instead of doing this sort of an all day timeframe, like we've been doing from nine to about three, we're going to try three 'til eight and see if that

will work. And it's over dinner so that maybe, you know, somebody can sneak out of work an hour early, get to the learning circle, that kind of thing... it's probably going to be six of one/half a dozen of the other, to be honest with you. But you know, at least we've giving it a try..."

These results differ according to the women staff's agency affiliation. For SWCD women, the most common response was format changes (23%, n=3), but a majority (46%, n=6) had no suggestions. NRCS women staff identified expanded curriculum (27%, n=3) as their top suggestion, with another 27% saying 'no suggestions.' Extension staff mentioned each of the top three categories once, whereas none of the Other women staff mentioned format changes. The top three results were consistent among women staff who have attended more than one learning circle or just one.

Future conservation topic suggestions

As already discussed in the suggested changes to the program, an increase in topics offered is desired by some of the professional staff. The women staff were asked specifically if there are any conservation topics they would like to see explored at future learning circles. A wide range of responses were given. Most of the women (53%, n=18), specified an agricultural conservation topic. Others suggested the need for discussing succession and estate planning (9%, n=3), along with financial information related to conservation practice implementation (6%, n=2) (Table 6).¹⁴

TABLE 6: FUTURE CONSERVATION TOPIC SUGGESTIONS (N=34)

TOP 3 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
Agricultural conservation topic	53% (n=18)
Succession/Estate Planning	9% (n=3)
Financial information related to conservation practice implementation	6% (n=2)
No suggestions	15% (n=5)

14. The count provided include any respondent who indicated these aspects as their #1 or #2 pick.

Within the agricultural conservation topic, numerous topics were provided. Five staff members suggested topics on forest management, and four suggested pollinators. The remaining topics noted in the interviews included: general conservation, cover crops, reduced tillage, the Conservation Reserve Program, water quality testing, grazing, ditch maintenance, tile drainage, riparian corridors, wildlife habitat, wetlands, resource management, and chemicals (i.e. fertilizers and herbicides).¹⁵

Regarding succession and estate planning, one staff member stated, *“I think one topic that would be good would be sort of farm succession planning or, you know, like a lot of the women [who] come to our learning circles have inherited the farm.”* Another staff member supported this idea, saying, *“One of the things that I’m hearing a lot of, and we here locally rely on [University name] Extension for is more along the lines of estate planning and those type things. You know, that’s not so much conservation related, but that is a topic that I am seeing come up in a lot of different circles.”*

Two staff members mentioned the desire for topics that discuss financial information related to conservation practice implementation. One staff member stated, *“It’s also gonna include some financial information which I think will be very helpful. Things like developing good contracts with your tenant farmer. Looking at the economic benefits of best management practices... things like that.”*

New contacts and program enrollment

We wanted to know whether the women staff made any new contacts as a result of the meeting, either with other staff or landowners. A majority of the women, 62% (n=21), stated that

they had made at least one new contact from the meeting (Table 7). Thirty-two percent (n=11) of the women staff from our interviews said that they did not make any new contacts, although one said she did refer someone to another staff member. The remaining 6% (n=2) said they could not remember (Table 7).

Out of the women who did make new contacts, seven said with landowners, seven said these new contacts were with both staff and landowners, and six women said with staff (Table 8). (The remaining respondent did not clarify if they were a staff member or attendee.) Of the 14 staff who indicated new contacts with a landowner, 13 of them indicated it was the landowner who contacted them personally after the learning circle meeting.

TABLE 7: NEW CONTACTS MADE (N=34)

NEW CONTACTS	PERCENTAGES (N)
Yes	62% (n=21)
No	32% (n=11)
Unsure	6% (n=2)

SWCD had the highest number of women staff making contacts with landowners, with seven respondents indicating this. For NRCS women staff, the same number who made contact with landowners (n=4) was the same for those who did not make any contacts (n=4).

TABLE 8: WITH WHOM CONTACTS WERE MADE (N=21)

NEW CONTACTS	PERCENTAGES (N)
With landowners	33% (n=7)
With staff & landowners	33% (n=7)
With staff	29% (n=6)

We also asked the staff if they had any knowledge of whether any landowners have enrolled in conservation programs or requested technical assistance as a result of the learning

15. This is the comprehensive list of conservation topics that were suggested, with some staff members mentioning more than one.

circle (Table 9). The results were mixed. Eleven of the women staff (32%) stated that they knew of landowners taking action in one of those two ways. Another eleven women (32%), however, said that they did not know of any women attendees taking action. Eight women (26%) said they were unsure. The remaining four respondents said that they knew of attendees who were beginning to show interest, start the process, or request more information, but have not yet enrolled or requested assistance.

TABLE 9: CONSERVATION PROGRAMS ENROLLMENT (N=34)

TOP 2 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
Yes	32% (n=11)
No	32% (n=11)

Of the 15 women who stated that they knew women landowners who have taken action (n=11) or are beginning the process of implementing conservation as a result of the learning circle (n=4), we then asked them which practices they are seeing or being considered (Table 10). The most common practices identified (by three of the women, 20%), was cover crops. Other practices that were identified include: enrollment in Conservation Reserve Program, forestry management, and pasture grazing/planning.

TABLE 10: PRACTICE IMPLEMENTED OR BEING CONSIDERED (N=15)

TOP 4 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
Cover crops	20% (n=3)
Conservation Reserve Program	13% (n=2)
Forestry management	13% (n=2)
Pasture grazing/planning	13% (n=2)

Landowner barriers identified

Through their interaction with women landowners, we were also interested to know

what, if any, barriers the staff have observed for women landowners in their role as an agricultural landowner (Table 11). The three primary responses included: (1) the landowner-renter relationship; (2) level of knowledge in agricultural practices; and (3) gender barriers preventing women from being the primary decision-maker.¹⁶

TABLE 11: LANDOWNER BARRIERS (N=34)

TOP 3 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
Landowner-renter relationship	35% (n=12)
Level of knowledge of agricultural practices	32% (n=11)
Gender barriers	21% (n=7)

The landowner-renter relationship was identified by 35% (n=12) of the staff members in our study. Intimidation, lack of confidence, and not being taken seriously were the three most common observations for why these women were perceived as struggling with their renter relationship. One staff member describes it in this way, *“There’s just the gap between the owner and the tenant, and so we’ve found that a lot of women that end up owning the land sort of end up also inheriting the tenant farmer. And there’s always this sort of intimidation factor for the women. Another staff member stated, “Many of the women talk about not being taken seriously. By the operators and I also think many of them don’t think of themselves as the one that has the... [that] they have something farmers want. They’re like afraid they aren’t going to be able to find a tenant.”*

The landowner-renter relationship at times is closely related to the women’s level of knowledge of agricultural practices, identified by 32% (n=11) of the women staff as a barrier. One staff member says from her observations, *“I think the biggest thing is just they don’t know where to begin and don’t know what options*

16. The count provided include any respondent who indicated these aspects as their #1 or #2 pick.

are out there, so it can be a little overwhelming. Especially if you don't have an agriculture background. You're not even sure who to ask and what to ask. So, it's that first step. I think once you get that first step and they at least know what options are out there and who to talk to about them, that's huge, but most people just don't even know where to begin because their dad handled that, or their husband handled that or someone else handled that. And you know when they get in a situation where all of the sudden they are the ones in charge of the property, it's kind of a deer in the headlights sort of moment, so the farmer a lot of time tends to be the default, like 'Well what do I do? You're the one that should be taking care of this.' So letting people know, it's great, you definitely need to be talking to your farmer, he's the one that's going to be out in your field, but here's another group of people, here's some other options that can help you to make a

more informed decision." Another staff member stated, *"That's one of the main reasons why we have the learning circles is to give the women landowners more knowledge so that they have more confidence in, you know, what to even talk to the tenant farmer about. I think that's still a little bit of a factor or a challenge in getting the women to make that step to talk to their farmer and about getting more conservation practices on the ground."*

The third most common observation of the barriers women landowners may face, identified by 21% (n=7) of the staff, was gender-related barriers. One staff member notes, *"Every time [in the learning circles] there's been a story where the guy won't listen to 'em [women landowners] and the comment is made, 'Well, they won't listen to me because I'm a woman.' You know, so I think in every meeting I've heard that."* Another



staff member shares her observations, *“These women have not felt included in the decision making process for decades and now they have an interest in it, and there’s some people who are telling them, ‘hey, you are empowered to make changes, you are empowered to have the right to ask questions. You have the right.’ But there is a whole world of people out there saying, ‘oh just butt out. Don’t bother us with your stupid little questions.’ And... so that is absolutely the number one obstacle in my mind is making these women understand that they have every right to ask questions, they have every right to help make decisions, and to be expected to be a part of the decision-making process.”*

For NRCS women staff, the landlord-renter relationship was the most commonly identified barrier (55%, n=6), whereas SWCD staff were more likely to identify the level of knowledge (38%, n=5). These two barriers were tied as the most commonly identified across Extension and Other staff. Additionally, women who attended one learning circle were more likely to identify only these two barriers, but women attending more than one learning circle identified all three of the barriers.

Future participation and their hope for the future

The women staff were asked if they were interested in participating in more learning circles in the future. Almost all of the women, 88% (n=30), emphatically stated that they would be happy to participate in the future. The remaining 4 women were either ambiguous in their response or said possibly (Table 12).

TABLE 12: INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN FUTURE LEARNING CIRCLES (N=34)

	PERCENTAGES (N)
Yes	88% (n=30)
Possibly	12% (n=4)

The final question we posed was what the women staff hoped to see as a result of these meetings. The top three responses identified, include: (1) increased knowledge of agricultural practices (38%, n=13); (2) increased involvement and/or confidence of women landowners (35%, n=12); and (3) conservation action on the land (26%, n=9) (Table 13).¹⁷

The number one hope focused on increased knowledge of agricultural practices which ranged from increased general agricultural knowledge, to specific conservation knowledge, to where to go for resources. Take, for example, this response from one staff member, *“Well I, I hope with these meetings, that the gals walk away with a better understanding of how they impact their land. I want them to understand that they do have an impact. It can be a positive or a negative. And we want to make sure they also know where they can go to get more conservation-related information, where they can get assistance.”* Another staff member stated, *“My goal is to get women as involved in the decision making on the farm as the man. And I think education is a part of that. You know, and whether that involvement is today, or if it just means the husband passes away and then she picks up and can run with the operation, that’s fine. I just want her to be... feel like she’s got the knowledge to be able to pick up and run with it.”* For another staff member she stated, *“My goal would be to have the women armed with the knowledge they need to better take care of their land. And to know where to go for more resources or for people with the knowledge or interest in the same things as them. So basically learn from each other.”*

The second most common hope focused on the increased involvement and/or confidence of women agricultural landowners. In the words of one respondent, *“Just that women get more*

17. The count provided include any respondent who indicated these aspects as their #1 or #2 pick.

involved and, and to get that comfort level that they're willing to start attending things, start asking more questions, start taking more of an active role." Another staff member expressed a similar sentiment, saying, *"The goal would be for women to feel more comfortable in making landowner-type decisions. Whether it be conservation or even just landowner decisions in general. You know, new operators and choice of operators and all that kind of stuff."*

Finally, there is also hope for conservation action on the land. This could include increased adoption of specific conservation practices or better management of resources. In the words of one participant, *"Well, ultimately it would be better management of resources. Whether it's by women or by men. You know, just people taking care of their resources and passing it on to the next generation."* Another staff member said, *"My ultimate goal is that they understand they have an impact and that it's a positive one, and it's positive because they're willing to use conservation practices on the land."*

While these top three hopes for the future were consistent across the women's agency affiliation, there was variation among agencies. For NRCS women staff, the most common responses were increased involvement and/or confidence of women landowners and increased knowledge. SWCD staff, on the other hand, had slightly more women state that increased knowledge and conservation action were their primary hope. Of the two Extension staff, one mentioned knowledge, and the other cited landlord-renter relationship improvements. For Other women staff, the top two responses were increased women landowner involvement and/or confidence and conservation action on the land.

TABLE 13: FUTURE HOPES (N=34)

TOP 3 RESPONSES	PERCENTAGES (N)
Increased knowledge of agricultural practices	38% (n=13)
Increased involvement and/or confidence of women landowners	35% (n=12)
Conservation action on the land	26% (n=9)

Conclusion

The interview data has helped provide an in-depth evaluation of the learning circle meetings from the perspective of the professional women staff involved in the success of these meetings. Of the 34 women interviewed, 32% said they have spoken to women landowners who have been inspired to implement new conservation practices or requested technical assistance as a result of attending these meetings. It is critical to note that this is only action that the women staff are aware of, and that our previous report of women agricultural landowners identified 72% taking some form of action (Fairchild et al., 2018).

This evaluation shows the learning circle meetings are making a difference for women in agriculture. In order to improve the experience of women landowners, the staff had a few suggestions. Many women brought up the

need for an expanded curriculum, including expanding topics or having more specific topics in the curriculum. The women identified a wide range of agricultural conservation topics that may be beneficial. Additionally, some women staff identified format changes, such as one that is less structured or program changes that better fit the needs of the attendees, desiring more flexibility to adapt learning circles to the local needs of the women landowners. The data here clearly suggests that the women staff identify barriers that face women landowners, such as the landlord-renter relationship and their level of knowledge. Learning circles are providing women landowners with essential tools to help combat the barriers they experience. Taking these recommendations for improvement and learning from the experiences of these women can better enable educators to address these needs.





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Appendix: Interview questions for women staff

1. Which learning circles have you attended?
2. How were you involved in the learning circle you attended?
3. Overall, do you feel the meeting was successful in engaging women farmland owners or operators in conservation topics? IF yes, what were your observations?
4. Is there anything that you remember liking about the meeting?
5. Is there anything you would recommend doing differently?
6. Have you made any new contacts as a result of the meeting?
 - a. Have any landowners contacted you personally with further questions?
7. To your knowledge, has anyone from the learning circle enrolled in conservation programs or requested technical assistance?
 - a. If so, which practices?
8. Would you be interested in participating (or facilitating or hosting) more conservation learning circles in your area?
9. Are there any conservation topics that would be good to explore at future learning circles?
10. Since you work closely with women landowners and operators, have you observed any barriers that they may perceive impact their success in that role?
 - a. If so, what kinds of barriers?
 - b. Do they differ between landowners and operators?
11. As an agricultural professional, what do you hope to see as the result of these meetings and working as an agricultural professional in general?
12. Demographics:
 - a. Age?
 - b. Years at the agency? Years in current role at the agency? (if different)
 - c. Education level?

Resources

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