

# GENDER AND CERTIFIED ORGANIC PRODUCTION IN WASHINGTON STATE

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## Abstract

The face of U.S. agriculture is changing. Men have historically controlled agricultural land, labor, capital, and decision-making. Today, women make up a growing proportion of principal farm operators, especially in "alternative" agriculture. This research investigates the "gendered" nature of certified organic production in Washington State. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of female and male farmers will help land-grant universities, such as Washington State University, and other service providers better serve the needs of all organic producers.

## Research Questions

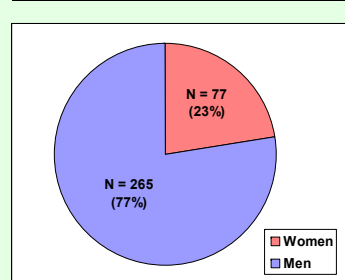
Do women and men ...

- operate different types of organic farms?
- farm organically for different reasons?
- rely on different sources of agricultural information?
- use different marketing strategies for their organic products?
- have different perceptions of the sustainability of their operations?
- face different challenges in making their organic farms successful?

## Research Methods

- Compiled list of all certified organic producers in Washington with information from WSDA Organic Food Program and Oregon Tilth
- Developed paper and Web versions of 16-page questionnaire
- Used personalized correspondence and First Class postage
- Conducted three questionnaire mailings and one reminder postcard mailing during October-December 2007
- Received 355 completed questionnaires (56% response rate)

## Survey Respondents by Gender



### Female Respondents

- 49 years old (mean)
- 31% grew up on farms
- 14 years of farming experience (mean)
- 49% work off-farm
- 26% have graduate degrees

### Male Respondents

- 53 years old (mean)
- 64% grew up on farms
- 23 years of farming experience (mean)
- 28% work off-farm
- 11% have graduate degrees

## Farm Characteristics by Gender

### Male Respondents

- 131 certified organic acres (mean)
- 289 conventional acres (mean)
- 60% transitioned from conventional production
- Largest portion of gross organic farm income:
  - 39% – Tree Fruit
  - 19% – Vegetables
  - 13% – Berries / Grapes
  - 8% – Milk / Dairy
  - 21% – Other

### Female Respondents

- 45 certified organic acres (mean)
- 25 conventional acres (mean)
- 16% transitioned from conventional production
- Largest portion of gross organic farm income:
  - 40% – Vegetables
  - 18% – Berries / Grapes
  - 10% – Tree Fruit
  - 7% – Herbs
  - 25% – Other

## Most Important Reasons for Farming Organically

	Men	Women
#1	Price premiums for certified organic products	Land stewardship / environmental sustainability
#2	Consumer demand for organic products	Community values / quality of life
#3	Economic sustainability of farm	Health of consumers
#4	Land stewardship / environmental sustainability	Personal, family, or farm worker health
#5	Quality of organically grown produce	Quality of organically grown produce

Economic Factors

Social Factors

## Importance of Organic Farming Information Sources

Family members  
Formal education  
Agricultural input suppliers  
Private consultants  
Commodity / grower associations  
Marketing cooperatives

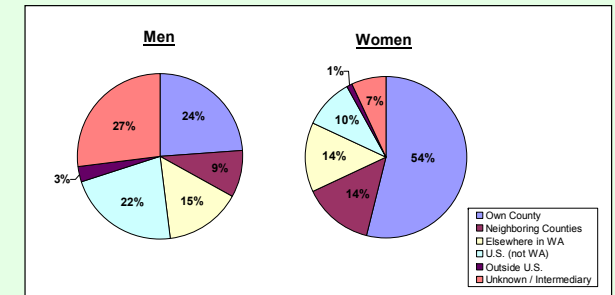
No statistically significant gender differences

Other farmers  
Workshops / seminars  
Field days / farm walks  
Newsletters / magazines  
Internet resources  
Own experimentation

WA Tilth  
WSDA  
ATTRA  
USDA-SARE  
WSU Extension  
WSU Researchers

These information sources were more important to women than men (p ≤ .05, t-test)

## Marketing of Certified Organic Products to Consumers in Different Geographic Areas



## Perceptions of Sustainability

Study participants were asked their level of agreement with various statements about organic farming. Women agreed more strongly than men with these three statements (p ≤ .05, t-test):

- Organic farming is more environmentally sustainable than conventional farming.
- Organic farming is more economically sustainable than conventional farming.
- Organic farming is more socially sustainable than conventional farming.

Study participants were then asked "to what degree do you think your organic farm operation contributes to" 22 potential goals for sustainable agriculture. Women reported significantly higher contributions for 19 of the potential goals (p ≤ .05, t-test). Goals with the highest contribution levels were:

- |  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
| #1 Protect human health                            | #4 Provide wildlife habitat  |
| #2 Reduce toxins released into environment         | #5 Promote soil conservation |
| #3 Establish relationships of trust with consumers | #6 Protect biodiversity      |

## Organic Farming Challenges

### TOP FIVE CHALLENGES

- #1 High cost of organic inputs
- #2 High labor costs
- #3 Variable or low yields
- #4 Inability to find enough farm labor
- #5 Difficulty in obtaining organic inputs

No statistically significant gender differences

Sense of isolation from other farmers  
Not taken seriously as a farmer  
Lack of family support  
Lack of farming background  
Lack of business background  
Not welcome in farmer associations  
Gender discrimination

Women faced these challenges to a greater extent than men (p ≤ .05, t-test)

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