I have to be kind of careful because my attitude is we don’t need to feed the world. We don’t need to feed the world! I understand it’s an agroeconomy. I understand that. We have to have jobs in this state—I totally get it. But it is not our inherited responsibility to feed the world, not at the cost of depleting our natural resources. I don’t believe in that.

–Rachel

Statistically, as a farm owner who is a woman, Rachel is in abundant company—women own or co-own about half of the farmland in the United States. Like many women farmland owners, Rachel does not farm her land, but instead leases out her farm to tenant-operators.

In the Midwest, research has found that women farmland owners often cede their power to men—their tenants, family, or co-owners—rather than actively managing the land themselves. In Iowa, women own or co-own 47 percent of Iowa’s farmland and 52 percent of its leased farmland. The increased concentration of farmland means there is increasing competition for it. Farmland ownership has long been a complicated arrangement, but these new trends in non-operator

* Quotations are verbatim transcriptions from recorded conversations from group meetings or in-depth interviews. All names have been changed to protect the identities of the women farmland owners who shared their stories with me.
ownership mean that a landowner’s relationship with the tenant-operator is of increasing importance to understand for those interested in landscape-level changes.

Yet, through alternative social networks, some women are finding ways to put their power as landowners into practice. From 2012 to 2015, I traveled my home state of Iowa meeting with women landowners to learn more about these changes on the land and what lessons might be useful for others engaged in landscape-level change. These conversations in the heart of the Corn Belt, where commodity agriculture is king, help us to understand how land remains a site of patriarchal power and the ways in which gendered social processes continue to influence decision-making about farmland transition and change.

My conversations with these women were anything but similar—each conversation, each woman’s life, and the various tracts of land in question were very different. They owned Iowa farmland with spouses, cousins, siblings, parents, and children. They owned land alone. They had inherited land or bought it, sometimes both. These conversations took place as we walked through timbers and past century oaks, through fledgling orchards, and along riparian buffers bordering creeks. I met with women in late winter snowstorms and on early spring mornings. We climbed over fences, up hills, and walked down gravel roads. We talked in library meeting rooms, coffee shops, living rooms, at kitchen and dining room tables, quiet corners at conferences, and in church basements. Usually in person, but sometimes by email or over the phone, I listened to stories about families, love, loss, heartache, and hope—but always land.

**Land as Power**

The women I met with were all privileged in that they own farmland, a limited resource and one that, in the settler-society of the United States, has been used historically to centralize power among white men. Historically, even white women in the United States were excluded from land ownership, as land was passed on between generations of male family members. The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production, by rural sociologist Carolyn Sachs (1983), chronicles the long history of women’s marginalization in US agriculture. Fathers controlled the transfer of farmland and determined its future distribution among their sons. A daughter could inherit land only in the case that a father had no living sons and, once the daughter married, she lost the title again to her husband. Widows did not have legal control over their deceased husband’s land until the 19th century, and, even then, they were expected to manage it only until their children reached adulthood.

Though the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) began collecting demographic information about race as early as 1900, it did not begin collecting information about gender until 1978, and it was not until the 1981 changes in US inheritance taxes that women were recognized as legal co-owners of farm operations upon the death of their husbands. The imperialism of land’s symbolic power continues. Today, the mediation of farmland access and management continues to be centralized in the power of white men. An ethnographic study of an Iowan agricultural community found that the women who did own land had primarily inherited it or acquired it through marriage.

**Changes On The Farm**

Iowa is an ideal site in which to study these gendered dynamics of farmland ownership. As a state with over 90 percent of its land used for agricultural production, farming is both an important business and a cultural identity. Iowa ranks first in the US for production of corn and soybeans, as well as hog and egg production. It also produces nearly 30 percent of the nation’s ethanol. In 2012, Iowa exported over $11.3 billion in agricultural products. The “feed the world” narrative of dominant agricultural systems is alive and well here, and those who choose to farm something different are subject to scrutiny, even as Iowa’s rich topsoil washes downstream and our water is increasingly polluted, compromising future fertility of our farmland. Thus, tensions between different agricultural approaches, in which gendered dynamics often manifest, are both economic and emotional.

Conserving a prairie, restoring a wetland, installing a stream buffer—these are radical acts for farmland owners in the middle of the Corn Belt, where state fairs and state leaders regularly celebrate the monoculture of corn and soy. The tendency to devalue alternatives and limit possibilities is also reflected in the social norms of agricultural communities, where important agricultural information is discussed and exchanged most often at the coffee shop or the local seed or fuel co-operative.

“Men at the co-op don’t talk. Some men try to help you. Some men don’t want you to farm at all; they want to buy the land, and they basically want you to give it to them,” a woman at a northeastern Iowa meeting explained to me.
Excluding women may not be the explicit agenda, but it persists through unquestioned conventions. Through these social interactions and expectations, historic patterns of land tenure continue to influence both how land is used and who makes decisions about land use today.

Creating changes on their farmland was not without consequence for many of the women who shared stories with me. Bev crop-shared with a tenant, splitting the investment and decision-making regarding the farming of her land, and had done extensive conservation work on her farm to improve soil conservation and water quality. She shared that these acts were viewed as “crazy” in her community:

I have taken cropland out of production, which makes me look crazy. [. . .] You know, some people think that you should grow corn on every acre or soybeans on every acre, and here's this crazy woman taking cropland out of production when they're tearing up things and putting it into production. And what is she doing? And why? And why is she putting cover crops on and all those things over the years?

As is common in many land transfer situations, Bev had inherited her farm's operator-tenant when she inherited the family farm. After many years of working together, she learned that this tenant was not respecting her plans. When she confronted him, he admonished her decision, telling her “[Your dad] would never do that,” to which Bev replied, “You're not dealing with [my dad].” She explained to me, “It was my farm. And he hadn't got that through his head yet, and that was the last year that he farmed for me.” In addition to illustrating the assumption that men know best about farmland management, Bev's story also illustrates the dominance of the “feed the world” narrative: growing corn on every acre is seen as good, whereas doing some conservation work is seen as “crazy.”

Despite these challenges, women are making changes on their farms. The alternative networks agricultural women have formed as a response to their historical exclusion provide women a unique opportunity when it comes to landscape level changes in our agricultural system. These alternative networks are places where community, land-ownership, and stewardship can be redefined on women's own terms. Having these networks inspired Kristin with the notion that change was possible:

I cannot do it alone, and that's why these meetings [for women] are so important to me, be-

Cultivating these networks where they are growing may help us translate landscape-level shifts in power to institutional shifts, not just for women, but for all who are challenging dominant paradigms of land use and land power.

**Alternative Social Networks and Social Change on the Farm**

The women I spoke with identified two challenges to actively managing their farmland—exclusion and isolation. Those who were successful in changing or putting in motion eventual changes on their farms were all a part of alternative networks. Through these alternative networks, women found information and support to change the default social relationships involved in their farmland management.

As Karen, who co-owned inherited farmland with her siblings, shared:

I mean, obviously, I think Women, Food and Agriculture Network definitely helps with that [learning about conservation]. You feel sane because there’s a whole network for it. When I came here, it just was a godsend just to know I had a safe place where somebody understood me and I could learn, really. Other people's stories are important.

When Connie inherited the farm, she began to work closely with her tenant—a cousin—to integrate prairie as a conservation measure on the farm even though she recognized it challenged beliefs about how farm-land would be used. “People say you have to farm every inch,” she said. “I say no, you can put some aside for wildlife.” She shared that her tenant/cousin is supportive of the prairie conservation, though he “gets harassed” by “the coffee shop crowd” in the community because they did not think taking 40 acres out of production and putting it into prairie was an appropriate use of farmland.

These networks also provided landowners with much-needed information for farmland management. Cathy, upon being widowed, took a more active role in
learning about farmland management through information she learned at Practical Farmers of Iowa meetings. This information helped her to renegotiate her lease with her tenants, and shifted power in their relationship:

I think they [the tenants] perceived me as the clueless widow from [the city] who didn’t know what rents were, and they kind of got one over on me. And then we had kind of a talk a year ago, and I pointed out to them that I knew what I was doing and that I was very intentional about giving them the rental rate and the five-year lease because I wanted to help them. And I think that might have changed their perception a little bit, not so sure but it was a real eye-opener for me, because now I understand the importance of putting in the lease conservation practices, tilling practices, requirements for cover crops, all of those kinds of things that I thought weren’t necessary.

Women landowners experienced gendered constraints to creating change on their farmland. Cathy, who co-owned some of her family’s multi-generational farmland with her sisters, shared with me her plan to place her family’s farmland into a land trust upon the death of an extended family member. The extended family member had been the farm manager for decades but had no legal authority over the land now. Cathy shared that she and her sisters had initially approached the family member in an effort to share the idea as one possible option for the land’s future, but the family member’s reaction was one of anger:

So, anyway, we all agreed that it would be a wonderful thing to sell this land to the DNR [Department of Natural Resources]. And then when I told my uncle, he just freaked out. He’s in his seventies; he grew up on that farm, and to him it was just the worst possible thing you could do. I mean, if I had gone out there and sprayed Roundup over the whole farm, he’d think that was wonderful, but to sell it as conservation ground is ‘destroying that land, absolutely destroying that land and destroying everything’ that his father had worked for.

Cathy’s extended family member’s influence, and the potential for conflict within the family and extended community, was too great a risk for Cathy and her sisters to continue on with their plans in that moment.

Alternative social networks were essential to landowners who were doing something different than the status quo, and who instead were focused on conserving soil and water while ensuring farmland for future generations. These alternative social networks provided validation; they proved that even if they, as women, did not fit expectations about who makes decisions about farmland, they were not alone.

The roots of systemic change are taking hold in these alternative networks. Maintaining these networks will be a challenge, and one that researchers studying women’s agricultural organizations in the Eastern United States have already found to be threatened by co-optation and economic pressure. A first step to cultivating the future of these networks is to understand their importance and share their stories. In Iowa, for women farmland owners, alternative networks provided a sense of the possible, mentorship, needed information, and inspiration.
About this special series:
This issue brief is the second publication in a multi-authored series on Cultivating Gender Justice. In this series, we seek to uncover the structural foundations of sexism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations, and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions, and structures that hold patriarchy in place. To end hunger and malnutrition, we must end injustices in the food and agriculture system. Thus, dismantling sexism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations, and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society as a whole. Food First invites contributions on this topic from authors engaged in research and community action to dismantle patriarchy in the food system. Contact akruzic@foodfirst.org for submission information.

Endnotes:
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.