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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# WOMEN & WATER : CALLING



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image of Ann Raiho with a canoe, is courtesy of Natalie Warren.

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PERSPECTIVES

# WOMEN LANDOWNERS AND THE LANGUAGE OF PARTNERSHIP NEEDED FOR WATER QUALITY CHANGE

By Linda Shenk, Jean Eells, and Wren Almitra

**I**n the Midwest, women landowners are one of the most powerful populations who can effect real change in water quality. Their potential, however, has been under-recognized, and they have

been largely left out of conservation outreach and education (Eells & Soulis 2013; Druschke & Secchi 2014). Agriculture has traditionally been the purview of men, and the very language in



*The creek buffer that one woman farmland owner succeeded in planting on her land. Image courtesy of Carolyn Van Meter.*

agriculture and conservation itself is problematic. Terms such as “non-operator” and “absentee landowner” perpetuate misperceptions of landowners as un-invested in, and distanced from, decision-making in agriculture. Further, these terms focus primarily on the land—and land as

an asset to be managed (operated)—and less on the vital connections between land use and water quality, between people and the natural world.

After a decade of working with over 3,500 women landowners, we contend that equipping



*Woman farmland owner out kayaking through her farmland to check erosion and the health of the land. Image courtesy of Ruth Rabinowitz/Oxbow Farms.*

them to recognize their agency as landowners leads them to take action that benefits the land, the wildlife, *and* the water. These women have participated in the Women, Food & Agriculture Network's Women Caring for the Land (WCL) program and have taught us a primary lesson: the agriculture conservation community could better advocate for water by replacing such land-centric and disempowering terms as “non-operator” and “absentee landowner” with language that empowers broader ecological stewardship. Even if those problematic terms for describing landowners are used more as insider language than within farming communities, they shape the culture and diminish the expectations conservationists have for what landowners can or should do.

We put forward the term “stewardship partners” as a better paradigm. This term fosters a more inclusive, collaborative mindset that is urgently needed to empower women (and other marginalized stakeholders) as well as to support sustainable agriculture and healthier watersheds. In this article, we share what we have learned from women landowners who have been involved in WCL programming: how the current culture and terminology present barriers; how certain strategies and activities empower and foster partnership for soil-water conservation; and how “stewardship partners” returns us to crucial Indigenous wisdom and practices that have been, like those of women, marginalized for too long.

## Hardly “absentee”: Women landowners as willing, but disempowered partners

In our experience, women landowners in the Central Midwest will take water-wise action when they are included in education, outreach, and decision-making. And they own a significant amount of land. In Iowa, for example, women landowners own or co-own nearly half of the 30,622,731 acres farmed in Iowa, representing nearly \$112 billion in agricultural assets (USDA 2019; ISU Extension 2020). When these women landowners first join WCL programs, they come with a range of experience and sense of agency. Some are completely new to being involved in decision-making for the land they own while others have been gradually working with the land and their tenants over years. As facilitators, we come to know their diverse experience, expertise, and familiarity with conservation in many ways—through a series of informal but structured conversations, storytelling activities, action-project applications, post action-project reports, and surveys—depending on the WCL program. WCL programming ranges from one-day events to multi-session learning circles that span months.

Because WCL participants have committed to attending a program about caring for the land, they are more likely to have an interest in stewardship; thus, they do not represent all women landowners. However, there have been thousands of participants in WCL, and they consistently express that they want to be involved. What is more, they demonstrate that they are long-view, ecological thinkers. Some of the women expressed their perspectives in a recent WCL learning circle series as follows:

- “We as landowners have a say. And we have a responsibility in our soil health, in the water that flows off the land, and in the type of tenant we have on the land.”
- “I believe there is a cost to doing nothing; I am constantly trying to evaluate what is the best to do economically *and* environmentally.”
- “We are really in this for the long game. Not just this season.”

Women tell us that they could have purchased stock or housing rental property if the land were merely a financial investment. They recognize that owning the land is a business but also a responsibility to the land and water. For example, this responsibility includes finding the “right” tenant—not just any tenant.

Despite their commitment to implementing soil-water conservation practices, these women experience barriers to taking action. They encounter these barriers because they are landowners—often non-operating landowners who have tenants as the operators who farm the land directly—and because they are women in the male-dominated and farmer-focused world of agriculture. These barriers involve norms that limit access to participation and information. They are true for all landowners, regardless of gender, but the nature of agriculture as a largely male-dominated sector intensifies these barriers for women. The following list describes some of these common barriers:

- *The pervasive social norm is that the farmer, not the landowner, is in charge.*

Current social norms tacitly limit and circumscribe what a landowner should and should not do. Non-operators are encouraged to remain passive, especially those who do not live on the farmland they own, are new to the process, or are trying not to “rock the boat” to maintain long-term relationships with tenants, family, and community members. The women we have worked with have often emphasized the pressure they feel to maintain harmony—playing on the common view of women as the peacemakers whose right place is to support, not to question or transform. As part of circumscribing the rights of women landowners, farm managers or tenants often discourage the women from walking their own land and becoming involved in decision-making.

- *“Non-operator-landowners” are not considered qualified to serve on committees and in leadership roles.*

As one participant shared, “I’ve been excluded from committees and so on because I’m not a farmer. And yet, doggone, I’m greatly engaged in agriculture.” If landowners—and women landowners in particular—are not fully at the decision-making table for farm and food policy at all levels, we lose integral voices for making needed change.

- *Unequal access to information occurs because of “non-operator” status.*

The legal terminology of the USDA, such as “operator” and “non-operator,” codifies barriers. These terms can prevent landowners and operators from sharing the same roles and accessing the same resources that would otherwise put landowners in a more informed, and therefore empowered, position to make changes. This approach inevitably excludes landowners who do not also define themselves as operators/farmers (and even some who do). Therefore, they are often in the dark about the terminology, agency support, and resources needed to advocate for changes they want to make. This practice, then, has the potential to perpetuate a cycle of dissociation—either real or perceived—on the part of the landowner as well as among landowners and conservation professionals, tenants, and others who are more “in the know.”

- *Information available in outreach, materials, and programming is often geared toward the traditional audience of male operators who directly farm the land.*

Materials depict male operators, male landowners, and often male agency professionals, and the conservation language in materials and programming is typically catered to people who are already “experts” in using the terminology that so many women landowners have had limited exposure to. In order to address this problem,

we created and published materials specifically to empower women landowners, co-designing the visuals and content with WCL participants. At WCL events, we place these co-designed publications alongside the traditional materials and have found that women pick up, take home, and refer to these new materials far more often. We consistently have to keep printing these items while the traditional ones are often packed up for another time. Examples of our downloadable brochures can be found at <https://wfan.org/women-landowner-resources>.

As a result of these barriers, landowners—especially women landowners—experience systemic isolation. Women in the WCL programs describe feeling like they are “on an iceberg” and explain that they often take someone with them into conservation and farm services offices in order to be taken seriously.

Recognizing the need for women-focused programming, WFAN created the Women Caring for the Land program, which offers women landowners single and multiple-day “learning

circle” events involving supportive peer-to-peer learning and an acknowledgement of all members as bringing important knowledge (Eells & Adock 2014). These learning circles combine information that integrates soil, water, and land health within an atmosphere conducive to relationship building. For example, participants learn how to do the slake test. This test shows the stability of different soil conditions when wet (such as with or without root exudates or “glues” from soils under cover crops). It is simple enough to be done at home using canning jars and plastic netting, and, when used with water quality testing strips, correlates soil stability and water quality. This simple test demystifies the science, connects land with water, and positions the women landowners to ask informed questions of their farmers.

For multi-session programs, we expand this soil-water integration to apply the principles of the slake test to a larger set of conditions that include (1) larger geographical scales such as a whole field, series of fields, or a watershed; (2) varying precipitation patterns, which involve recent conditions as well as climate change



*Woman farmland owner demonstrating the slake test at a local event she hosted on water quality and native plants. Image courtesy of Tamara Deal.*



projections; and (3) the role of social capital in supporting resilient social-environmental systems. For this part of the multi-session programming, we use a simple computer simulation model and storytelling activities designed to go with it that allow both the women and us as facilitators to share our diverse expertise, values, and questions (Shenk et al. 2021). These storytelling-simulation activities range from individual sessions with woman landowners to sessions that involve a group sharing together. These activities allow the types of information and action discussed to meet each woman where she is in her process and consider her questions and strengths in the systems of social and environmental factors that support action.

These women do not just talk. They take action. They not only take steps regarding conservation practices on the land they own, but even organize events that support connections in their watershed. In the WCL program, as well as in similar programs with organizations such as American Farmland Trust, 70 percent of participants take a conservation action within a year of attending a workshop (Petrzelka et al. 2019). In programming, it is important to emphasize a spectrum of actions that can include, for example, talking post-session with a tenant or family member about what was learned. Whereas initiating a conversation with a tenant may seem insignificant, it is an enormous step in shifting the power dynamics in conservation implementation because it builds relationships.

This approach acknowledges that this process is complex and rarely linear. It often requires

## Stewardship Partners

Conservation efforts need to include landowners—in conversations, in access to information, in leadership roles, and in the shared responsibility for stewarding the land. The existing language of “operator/non-operator” privileges certain

ongoing conversations and negotiations between a landowner and tenant or, in some cases, a landowner needing to find a new tenant if they cannot come to agreement about a practice, securing technical and financial assistance, and overcoming other barriers like isolation in their communities. This process can sometimes take years but would not happen at all without the women feeling empowered to take those actions. And it can lead to the traditionally recognized action outcomes of conservation implementation: deciding that a change needs to occur on the land, engaging with a tenant, and meeting with agency professionals to get the ball rolling. Common practices that landowners have implemented in partnership with their tenants include cover crops, no-till farming, grassed waterways, and riparian buffers among others. Their actions have also included hosting watershed-focused events that involve water quality, native prairie plants, and relationship building. With these latter projects, they become stewards in their watersheds—building relationships in what we often call “watershed neighborhoods.”

The actions these women take are impressive, but they deserve, and need, larger systemic change. At conferences and workshops, we continue to hear conservation educators and practitioners dismiss women landowners as hopelessly disinterested in conservation and interested only in the rent check. In fact, in these programs, older female names are often used as the quintessential example of a bad landowner. These sweeping generalizations are not accurate and perpetuate the problem.

individuals in the process and relegates all others into a “non” category of passivity. The existing terms also evoke a position of intervention and dominion over the land. Though we understand the legal considerations these terms convey, they

support a more extractive position vis-a-vis the land than a view that acknowledges social-environmental interconnectedness and reciprocity. “Stewardship partners” implies active, invested (not just monetarily) collaboration and caretaking. This term also places relationships at the center without limiting the range of relationships that matter—an openness that allows for a more holistic approach to social and human-natural world reciprocity.

Expanding the group of collaborative caretakers thus has greater implications than “just” bringing landowners more fully into the conversation. It is about broadening the spectrum of involved individuals and extending the responsibility beyond solely the operators. As one of the women landowners noted, “Local people always like to talk about what the farmers need to do, but I believe

it’s important for each of us to understand and put into practice what we *each* can do—whatever the scale is that we’re working on. I want everyone to learn about the concepts, and I don’t place importance on the scale. Could everyone get on board with water quality and how native plants can help? Maybe....I think I’m trying to find a big enough umbrella to get everyone under it.”

Terms such as stewardship partners allow more stakeholders “under the umbrella” and prioritize shared responsibility, partnerships, and connections with the natural world. This expansion of responsibility and relationships not only could encourage conservation efforts that support water quality, but this larger set of collaborations gets to the very connectedness of what is needed for watershed-thinking and for building healthier watersheds.

## Stewardship Partners: A New, Yet Old, Paradigm

Shifting the language to something akin to stewardship partners is both new, at least in our agriculture and conservation circles, but, frankly and profoundly, *not* new. Indigenous populations have long been in active partnership with the earth, embracing the importance of relationship to restoring and sustaining integrated ecosystems and leading efforts to protect this balance. As we write this article, Indigenous women are actively fighting for water protection in the northern Midwest. For centuries, both Indigenous farmers and farmers of African descent have been at the forefront of the conservation practices that today are too often deemed new or innovative.

Confronting “problems” with water—quality and quantity—requires examining the barriers

holding back the very people who are responsible for stewardship of the land and being clear about the hegemony holding them to the status quo. Conservation professionals must find common ground in language used and entry points to working with this population in order to help, not hinder, making their power visible.

Relationship-centered terms like “stewardship partners” open the conversation to include additional stakeholders and perspectives on environmental care that are more holistically focused. Although the term stewardship partners may be new language, it returns us to age-old practices and people, including women, we have not listened to nearly enough.

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