

## **Women in Agriculture/Science: Roundtable Discussion, Brandon, Manitoba<sup>1</sup>**

What do women working in agriculture/science say about their career choices, the changing status of professional women, and work-life balance? What advice would they give young women considering a career in agriculture or the sciences? We gathered some opinions at a women's roundtable discussion held in Brandon, Manitoba in early November 2009.

Women working professionally in agriculture/science/agri-resources in south-western Manitoba were invited to an evening of discussion hosted by AIC and Campus Manitoba. The purpose of the evening was:

1. To explore views of professional women working in agriculture/science from a broad cross-section of disciplines.
2. To form or strengthen a network of women in south-western Manitoba working in professional agriculture/science.
3. To use the results of roundtable discussion to raise awareness about gender equality in agriculture/science.

### *Background*

AIC has as its vision the wise use of the agri-resource base through sustainable and profitable maximization of societal and commercial benefits derived from the agri-resource base. Its mission is to build scientific and professional capacity for the wise use of the agri-resource base. As AIC explores scientific and professional capacity, the question is raised of how gender equality affects members and potential members working in the agri-sciences. It is difficult to know how representative AIC is within the agricultural scientific community without knowing the diversity and gender balance of this community. This aspect is being explored through various approaches, including this Roundtable to bring together professional women working in agriculture/science and representing a broad cross-section of disciplines.

### *The Process*

Out of 45 e-mail invitations sent by AIC, nine women sent regrets and twelve women working in the following sectors provided comments to questions which were circulated in advance.

- Federal research scientists
- Provincial extension specialists
- College faculty
- University administrator/former dean of agriculture
- Self-employed farmer/former university science professor
- Non-governmental organization officer

The women ranged in age from recent grads/newly hired to those who were thinking about retirement. They included members of the Manitoba Institute of Agrologists, professional home economists, several current members of AIC, and a few past members of AIC.

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<sup>1</sup> Summary report prepared by Dinah Ceplis, AIC International Program Gender Equality Officer, November 2009

## **What the Women Said**

*Career Choices:* Women's choices were influenced by growing up on a farm, family members who farmed, rural childhood, their connections to the environment, and pioneering opportunities of working with new technologies.

*Role of Mentoring:* Diverse experiences were based on generational differences. Women who studied in the 1970s and 1980s were often the first to study in their particular discipline or were a definite minority. They experienced varied support such as the lone female professor in a faculty who forged a path as a pioneer and mentored both female and male students, to negative comments about women enrolled in agriculture from male professors. Women who studied in the 1990s and 2000s were often a majority in their class and often had the support of both male and female professors. About half or more of the students enrolled in many academic programs in agriculture at colleges and universities in Canada now are women.

*Changing status of professional women in agriculture/science:* Over the last 12 – 15 years there has been a shift from generalists to specialists within extension services. There are more women than men in animal/science/crop disciplines within the provincial government. There has been an increase in women working in management positions within provincial government. There has been an increase in women in agricultural research, but agricultural research was affected by major staffing cuts in AAFC and there are very few female managers in AAFC. There has been an increase in tenured female faculty. Women represent 20% of the Deans of Agriculture and Technology in the college sector in Canada. There is now one woman dean of a university faculty of agriculture in Canada. More women are visible at industry trade shows which were once male dominated.

*Advice to high school girls about enrolling in a degree program, Master's or PhD:* We encourage girls to get an education in science and agricultural-related degrees, keep as many doors open as possible. Consider potential career streams. Several women encouraged young women to work towards a master's degree as opposed to a PhD as it is very difficult to get funding to carry out research at the PhD level. Lack of funding now for government research means that there is a need to 'fix the road ahead' via policy for the up and coming graduates.

A master's will lead to good employment opportunities without having an unbalanced life. A PhD always means moving from home area to get a job and a changing definition of "home". It means losing the extended family network and no family supports when it comes time to raise children. Three of the four women who are FAICs appear to have been single.

Also consider studying at the diploma level as not everyone is 'built for a degree'. Ask young people what they want to do with their lives before giving advice, and suggest that they go as far as they can. There must be a passion and independence and values. Money is not everything but you need it. Education and passion are important, choose something which sparks you.

Pay attention in the fundamental courses. Even if you find them boring, or think that you may not be able to apply them in the real world, it will all come together when you get out in the workforce. Soft skills, for example communication courses, are equally important in your professional career as are those courses that you take which are core to a degree. If they don't offer them at University then take them at a nearby community college.

If you are going to do a research-based program, ensure that you have an advisory board that meets your needs up front! Research the advisory member thoroughly. Be assertive and take charge of your educational experience in grad school.

*Work-Life Balance:* The women ranged in age from new mothers to those who had launched their adult children into careers or had no children. Many are in the sandwich generation where they are assisting aging parents. Most agreed that it was very difficult to achieve a balance because of family responsibilities, work and technology demands. Personal time had to be planned into the schedule and required supportive spouses/families.

*Career Path and Progression:* Career progression is never the same between men and women. It is typically a slower progression for women as raising children and other family obligations delay attainment of education and employment. Women earn less than men because of the late start as researchers and attain senior scientific capacity close to retirement years. Things that affected career and employment decisions included marriage, economically supporting the spouse while they did their Masters/PhDs, relocation because of the spouse's job, time off for babies, serendipity and mentors.

*Recommendations* included ideas for promoting AIC, exploring ways to impact policy on research funding, establishing mentoring programs for students and young professionals in rural areas, communicating with faculties of agriculture about female student enrollments, and forming a network. The evening concluded with suggestions to meet again informally in about six months for a networking event and to invite other colleagues.