

Women entrepreneurs in farm businesses

What is this research?

In December 2020, Defra funded a study into how women entrepreneurs in the agriculture industry are being affected by EU Exit and Covid-19, both now and in the future, which focused on three themes:

- EU Exit, Covid-19, off-farm income and on-farm diversification.
- EU Exit, Covid-19 and support for women's entrepreneurial activities.
- Women and organics/regenerative farming/environmental land management.

An online survey (N=63) was conducted with women on farms alongside 17 online/telephone interviews with women on farms, an agricultural valuer, a farm business consultant and a NatWest officer and two online focus groups with women on farms.





What are the findings - survey?

- 57% of the participants' qualifications are not in an agriculture-related subject. Most are married into their farm, rather than entering as successor.
- 56% state that they have a diversification business on the farm, and 44% do not. Most juggle diversification business with childcare, farm work and working full-time off-farm.
- 46% have been running their diversification business for more than 10 years, with only 11% having been started in the past year.
- The motivation for diversification is mostly to support farm income (46%) and, to a lesser extent, to expand their business (11%) or take on a challenge (23%).
- Most businesses have an online presence: 42% sell products and 51% take bookings and advertise their lets online.
- 83% state that it was either their decision, or a joint decision, to start the diversification business.
- 27% state that they receive support from organisations or business networks.
- There is a mixed response on the impact of EU Exit which is mostly due to the uncertainty surrounding it, and dependent on how their customer base will be impacted and future trade agreements.
- In terms of the impact of Covid-19, 89% say it had a negative impact on their business.
- Strategies implemented to mitigate the negative impact included starting a different venture, adapting how the product is sold or suspending the service.
- 43% state they would like to develop a diversification business in the future to expand the business and the farm's income, however, diversification would be a distraction to some respondents, especially with the uncertainty of the impact of EU Exit and Covid-19.
- The majority state they would like to receive marketing (53%) and financial advice (74%).
- 57% state they were either already engaged with regenerative or organic farming practices. For most of the participants (72%), it is to enhance biodiversity on their farm with support from Government Agri-Environmental schemes.

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What are the key findings - interviews and focus group discussions?

Off-farm income and on-farm diversification

- Women start businesses on farms to accommodate childcare, to increase profit, and for environmental reasons. Others work off-farm and their income supports the farm.
- Women are involved in decision-making on their farms, either as a joint decision-maker or having the principal role with diversified activities.
- Others start businesses, or change the way the business operates, in order to increase farm profit.
- Regarding the impact of Covid-19 on diversification activities, the findings are mixed. For many with tourist-related accommodation, it has been disastrous, however, meat boxes thrived which some women started during the pandemic.
- People are optimistic that Covid-19 has changed people's views of food and how they source it and believe this new-found business will continue.



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Support for women's entrepreneurial activities

- The majority of women who start businesses on the farm do not receive training or business support. They tend to start small and expand slowly.
- Even the most successful entrepreneurs do not describe themselves as entrepreneurs. The women are entrepreneurial and innovative. They are involved in farm diversification businesses and in some cases transform the family business from close to bankruptcy to a profitable one.
- Women say they value mentors and networks. New entrants tend to welcome the idea of access to mentors and business coaches while women involved longer with the business favoured engagement in networks.
- Women say they need training to recognise and utilise the assets on their farm and the skill sets that different members of the farm family may have, as well as training and advice on budgeting and marketing, especially for new entrants.
- There is general agreement that the women's networks are important sources of peer learning, exchanging ideas and sharing knowledge.
- Some women speak of the adverse impact EU Exit would have on women's farming activities as women's enterprises tend to be smaller, therefore the additional costs caused by EU Exit are more damaging to their enterprises.

Challenges/needs for the farm business

- Constraints to profitable farming include 'cultural' commitments to continuing the method of farming of parents without questioning its business efficacy.
- Constraints of inter-generational businesses are seen as presenting barriers to undertaking progressive farming methods.
- Seeing the farm as a lifestyle rather than a business for profit is raised. Many women are of the view that EU farm subsidies had hindered farmers' ability to see the farm as a business. Removal of subsidies, they say, would be good for the future and could lead to more innovative farming practices but would cause hardship in the short-term.
- Educational limitations and schools not pushing farming as a business occupation/valid career choice is a concern.

Women and regenerative/environmental/organic farming

- In general, women are committed to regenerative farming. Some are sceptical that they would lose farm income during the transition period. The majority of women who had pushed a regenerative model of farming did so because the farm had previously been losing money and this offered a more profitable business approach.
- Incentives help women to make the change to regenerative farming on their farm.
- Conversion payments would compensate for the transition period.
- Barriers include a macho culture of big is better, cultural constraints, outdated business models peddled by consultants and agricultural degrees no longer fit for purpose.
- The consensus is that some women who do not inherit farms go into the agricultural sector and are leaders in promoting cutting-edge farming practices, regenerative farming, organic production, animal welfare and ethical veterinary practice.

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What are the recommendations?

- A replacement for the EU rural development fund to encourage farm diversification incentives would benefit women entrepreneurs.
- To encourage regenerative farming, conversion payments can be made to help farms to ensure they do not lose income during the process of soil restoration.
- A model that goes beyond dealing with the principal farm holder could benefit women as part of farm decision-making. Women on farms, 'marrying in', bring fresh perspectives and are often key to driving progressive change.
- The content of training programmes needs to be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose with priority given to providing business training for women undertaking diversification initiatives.
- Given that women in farm businesses do not see themselves as 'entrepreneurs' or 'innovators', the terms used in funding, training and support programmes needs to reflect this for these to be as accessible as possible.



All images in this document (c) Joanne Coates. During a residency with the Maltings and Newcastle University's CRE and Institute for Creative Arts Practice, Joanne worked collaboratively with Professor Sally Shortall on women in agriculture.

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