

**Colorado Organic Women Farmers and Feminism:  
How They See Themselves and Their Work**

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I have read this thesis and agree that it meets the requirements for a Women's Studies Thesis on the project track.

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Date

The following work is in compliance with the Honor Code of The Colorado College. I have fully upheld the Honor Code of the Colorado College, and have not received unauthorized assistance.

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## **Table of Contents**

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Abstract .....	5
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	6
Chapter 2: Methodology.....	12
Chapter 3: Literature Review.....	16
Chapter 4: Findings.....	19
Chapter 5: Analysis.....	25
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	32
Chapter 7: Epilogue.....	33
Chapter 8: Reflections.....	34
Bibliography.....	36
Appendix A: Directory of Participants.....	38
Appendix B: Installation Quotes.....	39
Appendix C: Interview Questions.....	42

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## **Abstract**

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According to the United States Department of Agriculture, the number of farms operated by women has more than doubled since 1978 (Moskin 2005, 1). The 2002 Census of Agriculture found the number of women who were principal operators of farms increased 12.62 percent from 1997 figures, and the Organic Farming Research Foundation reports that 22% of organic farms are operated by women. To understand why women are increasingly attracted to organic farming, I conducted a qualitative study on the ideologies influencing women's choice to farm organically. I am specifically interested in whether these women's view of organic farming as a feminist practice is part of their motivation to engage in it. I gathered my qualitative data through in-depth interviews with and observations of organic farmers across Colorado. My analysis of themes I found in the interviews led me to conclude that organic farming is a feminist practice.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

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The overall purpose of this project was to explore why Colorado’s women organic farmers are farming organically. I was specifically interested in whether these women considered organic farming a feminist practice. What sparked my interest in this topic was a trend that I noticed in the rise of women identifying as organic farmers. It seemed as though, when I would talk to women who identified as farmers, almost all of them were passionate about not using chemicals or pesticides on their crops. After some preliminary research, I found out that this is actually a national trend found by Pennsylvania State University’s Women on U.S. Farms Research Initiative.<sup>1</sup> In the following sections I will outline my assumptions previous to the research conducted, my definition of feminist practice as it relates to this study, other theoretical definitions imperative to understanding the analysis, my findings and analysis, as well as my conclusion and reflections.

### *Assumptions*

My research was motivated by some “hunches” I wanted to explore. First, because the ideology behind organic agricultural practices in some ways parallels themes found in various feminist theories, I wondered if the ideology of women organic farmers might include a feminist ideology. According to International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) the principles of organic agriculture include:

1. Organic Agriculture should sustain and enhance the health of soil, plant, animal, human, and planet as one and indivisible.
2. Organic Agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.

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<sup>1</sup> [A] 2001 study by the Women on U.S. Farms Research Initiative at Pennsylvania State University concluded that when women are the main farmers, they’re far more likely than men to eschew chemical-intensive production and use “sustainable” agriculture practices — those that are ecologically and socially responsible as well as profitable. Those include, but not exclusively, certified organic methods (Lipson 2005).

3. Organic Agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.
4. Organic Agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to protect the health and wellbeing of current and future generations and the environment. (IFOAM)

Some of the general themes within various feminist theories that parallel these organic principles are plurality, nature/culture co-existence, community, knowledge, and connectedness. (See page 8-11 for a discussion of why these themes are feminist.)

Second, because the organic agriculture movement started in the 1960's at approximately the same time as the "second wave" of United States feminist movement, I thought it plausible that women organic farmers might be sensitized to the feminist movement and perhaps inspired by feminist principles.

Third, Trauger (2004) states, "when women assume the role of farmer they transgress the traditional gender roles, work culture, and ideologies that define the social narratives of farming" (290). After reading Trauger's study which found that women identifying as farmers were aware of their public role as one that transgresses traditional gender roles I began to wonder whether women organic farmers might be sensitized to questioning other aspects of traditional gender roles. Are organic women farmers typically feminine? Do they fulfill traditional gender roles within their families?

### *Definition of a Feminist Practice*

Articulating the definition of a "feminist practice" proved to be, by far, the most challenging aspect of my project. I finally decided to create one by synthesizing my own from the definitions of the words "practice" and "feminism." My definition of a "practice" is taken from the Encarta World English Dictionary which defines practice in part as "3. the

process of carrying out an idea, plan, or theory” and also as “5. a habit, custom, or usual way of doing something.” Therefore, a “feminist” practice is a process that carries a feminist idea, plan, or theory into a concrete way of doing something. For example, a feminist practice might recognize a situation in which the sexes are imbalanced – as in the current world situation in which women are economically, politically, and socially unequal to men - and actively work concretely in ways designed to create economic, political, and social equality among the sexes.

Numerous feminisms exist that might provide the theory behind a given feminist practice. The feminist themes I looked for in my research are the ecofeminist themes of plurality, nature/culture co-existence, knowledge and connectedness.

### *Plurality vs Duality*

Ecofeminists recognize and value plurality and define it as anti-hierarchical. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) critique modern (Western, patriarchal and capitalist) development’s value of duality over plurality by stating

the homogenization processes of development do not fully eliminate difference. These persist, not in an integrating context of plurality, but in the fragmenting context of homogenization...diversity is mutated into duality, into the experience of exclusion, of being ‘in’ or being ‘out’ (111).

Mies and Shiva also critique the “capitalist-patriarchal perspective (that) interprets difference as hierarchical and uniformity as a prerequisite for equality” (1993, 2). These ecofeminists critique capitalist patriarchy because they believe it is “based on a cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other: the one always considered superior, always thriving, and progressing at the expense of the other” (1993, 5). They state “(f)eminists have long criticized this dichotomy,

particularly the structural division of man and nature, which is seen as analogous to that of man and woman” (1993, 5). Sandra Harding (1986) also explains feminist concerns with duality:

the concern to define and maintain a series of rigid dichotomies in science and epistemology no longer appears to be a reflection of the progressive character of scientific inquiry; rather, it is inextricably connected with specifically masculine-perhaps uniquely Western and bourgeois-needs and desires. Objectivity vs. subjectivity, the scientist as knowing subject vs. the objects of his inquiry, reason vs. the emotions, mind vs. body-in each case the former has been associated with masculinity and the latter with femininity. In each case it has been claimed that human progress requires the former to achieve domination of the latter (409)

#### *Plurality and Nature/Culture Co-Existence*

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) argue that feminism recognizes that life, which is maintained by co-operation, enables the crucial preservation of diversity. In their book entitled Ecofeminism they write

an ecofeminist perspective propounds the need for a new cosmology and a new anthropology which recognizes that life in nature (which includes human beings) is maintained by means of co-operation, and mutual care and love. Only in this way can we be enabled to respect and preserve the diversity of all life forms, including their cultural expressions, as true sources of our well-being and happiness (1993, 6).

Ynestra King (1989) also states, “social ecology challenges the dualistic belief that nature and culture are separate and opposed. Ecofeminism finds misogyny at the root of that opposition” (470). Mies and Shiva (1993) believe that the influence of Enlightenment theories, such as the Darwinian “survival of the fittest” theory, created a culture in which struggle is a natural part of evolution. This world-view, they believe, “militates against an appreciation of the enriching potential of the diversity of life and cultures, which instead are experienced as diverse and threatening” (1993, 6).

### *Plurality and Women's Knowledge*

Knowledge is also a branch of the feminist plurality theme. It is defined as “that body of information, facts, and theories through which a society or culture defines what is true and important, what constitutes its past, and how it understands the complexities of the natural social worlds” (Bartkowski and Kolmar 2005, 45). “Women’s knowledge” refers to the type of knowledge that a given society associates with the feminine. Mies and Shiva (1993) critique Western, patriarchal society’s tendency to parallel science with knowledge. They state, “modern science is projected as a universal, value-free system of knowledge, which by logic of its method claims to arrive at objective conclusions about life, the universe and almost everything” (22). Feminist theorist Sandra Harding suggests that feminism supports a plurality of definitions for knowledge. She does not believe that knowledge is necessarily empirical and free from experience. Harding believes that feminism supports:

an alternative understanding of how beliefs are grounded in social experiences and what kind of experience should ground the beliefs we honor as knowledge. These feminist epistemologies imply a relation between knowing and being, between epistemology and metaphysics, that is an alternative to the dominant epistemologies developed to justify science’s modes of knowledge-seeking and ways of being in the world (409).

### *Connectedness*

The theme of connectedness is also prevalent in ecofeminist theory. Mies and Shiva (1993) believe that “ecofeminism is about the connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing” (14). Mies and Shiva critique Western, patriarchal capitalist societies in which “separation, which signifies alienation, becomes a means of ownership and control” (1993, 25). The valuing of

community is a subtheme related to connectedness that is also prevalent in ecofeminism.

According to Humm (1990), community is defined as “a group with common interest” (33)

and can also be defined as “a group culture or a local kinship” (33).

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

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In this project, I utilized the feminist research methodology of qualitative research. I find a feminist approach to research to be superior to any other research available because of the following three basic tenets of the feminist approach. The first tenet is avoiding an objective standpoint. According to Reinharz (1992), in order to avoid an objective standpoint “the class, race, culture, and gender assumptions, belief, and behaviors of the researcher her/himself must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint” (6). The second tenet of a feminist approach to research is a belief in multiple truths. Reinharz explains, “at the core of feminist ideas is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, not one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge” (1992, 7). The final tenet of feminist research is an understanding that the language of the study must be universally applicable to any audience. Reinharz states, “the articulation of values and their realization must depend on a participative democratic process involving all actors, not just norm setting elites” (1992, 108).

### Unit of Analysis

I studied women who either consider themselves independent operators of their farms or who are partners in an organic farm operation. My only criterion for deciding that a woman was farming organically was that she self-identify as an organic farmer.

### Sampling

In choosing informants for this research, I used both snowball research, in which I contact one person and then receive contacts from the first and so on, and purposive

sampling, in which I choose a specific group of informants. I also utilized several contacts in order to identify organic farmers in Colorado. The sample was purposive in that I specifically wanted to talk to women farmers that farmed organically, whether certified or not. This measure insures that the respondents have some interaction and experience with the organic agriculture movement or its practical applications.

The 15 women of this study range in age from 24 to 72 years, and their years of involvement in farming range from 5 to 35 years. All of the women appeared to be Caucasian. Their primary methods of marketing were through the local farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs in which consumers invest in the farm and receive weekly market baskets of produce through the growing season.

### Data Gathering

I gathered my data through formal and informal interviews with the farmers. I first set up and conducted audio-taped interview which lasted from 1.5 to 3 hours with each farmer on her farm. I then took a tour of her farm with her and asked more questions along the way. With some of the farmers I stayed even longer and helped them with farm work that they needed to get done that day. The data analysis was carried out after the completion of all the interviews and consisted of coding the interview notes for persistent themes.

For the photography portion of my project I took portraits of the women who agreed to participate in this portion. Due to time constraints, for some of the women I took only a few pictures and for other women I took several rolls.

## Power and Ethical Considerations

Reciprocity was one of the major ethical considerations that I faced in gathering my data. First of all, I wanted to avoid taking information from people without giving anything back. While I was unable to give monetary compensation to the subjects, I intended to offer my farming skills as a way of giving back hands-on labor for the time that they have taken to give information to my research. Secondly, I intended to meet with the interviewees in a place that is comfortable for them. I also intended to give the subjects a large role in determining what subjects the interviews covered, so as to give them control of what they found to be significant. This proved to be an incredibly successful tactic because it helped me to determine what themes and topics were most important to discuss in my findings and analysis.

I asked the subjects if they were willing to be subjects in my research and informed them that they could refuse to participate. I informed them that they had the right to refuse to answer any of my questions and to terminate the interview at any time. Also, because I am aware that theory is often confined to academic institutions due to a particular language often found in theoretical writing that is often not used by the general public, I actively attempted to use a universally applicable voice in my writing style.

The potential benefits to the subjects due to my project included the opportunity to reflect upon their lives as females in a male-dominated industry. I thought that the subjects might come to realize a greater understanding of the ways that they have overcome challenges in their practice and the networks of support that may have assisted them in

overcoming those challenges. I also predicted that the project could inspire the women to create a stronger network of support for other women in similar situations.

The potential benefits to society that I predicted include a greater appreciation of the presence and contributions of women as organic farmers in Colorado.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

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Literature on this topic was disappointingly limited. Mostly due to the fact that certified organic agriculture as it is known today has only been around since the 1960's, there is not very much research done specifically on women in organic agriculture. There is an abundance of literature on women in agriculture in developing countries, and some literature on women in conventional agriculture in America. The literature on women in conventional agriculture is mostly done on women's role as farmwives.

Patricia Allen and Carolyn Sachs are two feminist academics currently studying women's role in sustainable agriculture. In "Sustainable Agriculture in the United States: Engagements, Silences, and Possibilities for Transformation," they consider dominant perspectives and critique various aspects of sustainable agriculture in the U.S., aiming to create an opening for ensuring that sustainable agriculture becomes a more effective social movement. The authors discuss the contradictions inherent in these sustainable perspectives and suggest ways of transforming how sustainable agriculture is conceptualized and practiced. This chapter is the basis of the theory that I use in my analysis of various findings in my study.

Carolyn Sachs is the director of the women's studies program and professor of rural sociology at Pennsylvania State University. She continues to write various literature on rural women in agriculture, including the book that most applies to my study, Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture and Environment. The purpose of this book is to "provide a theoretical basis for understanding and transforming the institutional subordination of rural women" (1996, 3). In the book, Sachs does an excellent job of explaining and critiquing

feminist theory as it relates to rural women's lives. She explains patriarchal relations in agriculture as well as women's resistance effort within agriculture. Sachs also discusses a study she undertook on women's role in the sustainable agriculture movement in 1990. Her explanation of the finding and analysis of the findings in her study gave me a better understating of the trends that I might find in the answers from my interviews. It also helped me understand how feminist theory relates to the findings.

Amy Trauger received a doctorate from the same university and studied under Carolyn Sachs. She was an initiator of the Women on U.S. Farms Research Initiative. I used Amy Trauger's study on Pennsylvanian women in sustainable agriculture entitled "'Because they can do the work': Women Farmer in Sustainable Agriculture in Pennsylvania, USA" (2004) to guide my study. Believing that the sustainable agriculture community provides spaces that promote and are compatible with women's identities as farmers, Trauger designed a project that studied whether or not sustainable agriculture provides spaces of empowerment for women farmers. This study was much longer than my project and more in-depth. She created a preliminary survey for the women in a specific sustainable agriculture group and then followed up the survey with in-depth interviews and participant observation with twenty women farmers over an 18-month period. The themes that she tracked included transgression, space and the social narratives of farming; women's work roles in sustainable agriculture; identity transgression in space; and representation as resistance.

Other than these three texts, the only other information that I could find on women in organic agriculture was in a Ms. Magazine article and a New York Times newspaper article. Elaine Lipson's article in Ms. Magazine was the article that started my interest in organic

farming as it relates to feminism. This article discusses the connections between women, organic agriculture, and consumption of organic foods. While the article was particularly helpful for understanding the arguments as to why women might be more interested in the organic movement and why supporting organic agriculture simultaneously supports women, I found some of the arguments to be disappointingly essentialist.

I received some literature during my interviews from the women in my study. Susan Gordon gave me a copy of Julia Moskin's article in the New York Times and Anna Cure gave me a copy of a book edited by Anna Anderson entitled Women and Sustainable Agriculture: Interviews with 14 Agents of Change (2004). In Moskin's article she interviewed several organic women farmers in the outside of the New York City area. She asked them why they were farming and about their experience with being women and being organic farmers. The book by Anna Anderson interviewed 14 women who support sustainable agriculture in a wide variety of fields. Their titles range from attorney and a policy analyst to a conservationist and an activist. The book gave helpful insight into what kind of support is needed in order to maintain a sustainable agriculture movement and also what women's roles are within that support system.

My impression is that literature on this subject will continue to grow in the near future. The very first Women in Sustainable Agriculture conference was held last October (2005) in Burlington, Vermont. The reviews of this conference that I found were very positive. There is clearly a desire for addressing women-specific issues in sustainable agriculture.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

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All of the feminist themes explained on pages 8-11 arose in the interviews. In the following section I will outline my finding under the subtitles gender roles, age and machinery use; self and community identification as a farmer; knowledge; and feminist identification, and then in my analysis I will discuss how the feminist themes relate to the findings.

### Gender Roles, Age, and Machinery Use

I was not surprised that most of the women I interviewed who are over 30 years of age had little interest in performing mechanical labor on the farm. Confirming a 1980 national study on farm women done by Rosenfeld (as cited in Sachs 1998, 150), these older women, instead, took a more active part in other aspects of their organic agriculture business, such as marketing. Reasons my respondents stated in the interviews as to why they did not operate the farm machinery included feelings of inadequacy, having little interest in learning how to operate the equipment, and having little experience in its use. Some of the women blamed their feelings of inadequacy on essentialist expectations related to their femaleness, sometimes explaining, for example, that they did not feel “naturally” inclined to use machinery in contrast to men’s better developed “natural” understanding of machinery.<sup>2</sup>

A number of these women actually chose organic farming precisely because it allowed them to successfully farm using limited mechanized labor. Because the majority of

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<sup>2</sup> An essentialist position in reference to sex is “the belief that there is an immutable, eternal, and transhistorical essence of femaleness and maleness” (Bartkowski and Kolmar 2005, 47). Essentialists believe that sexual difference is innate, natural, inborn and persistent. A theory that critiques essentialist theory is the social constructionist theory. Social constructivists believe that “women and men are seen as produced through a ‘complex system of cultural, social, psychical, and historical differences’ (Fuss, xii)” (Bartkowski and Kolmar, 47). Social constructionists, such as Simon de Beauvoir (1949), argue that “one is not born a woman” but becomes one through social and cultural process (Bartkowski and Kolmar, 47).

organic farms in my study are small (under 20 acres), diversified (meaning a large diversity of crops are grown in one plot of land), and heavily farmed (meaning a very large amount of produce is grown in comparison to the amount of acreage), organic farming, much more than conventional farming, can be done with a very limited amount of machine labor. The women often “made up for” this reluctance to use machinery by asserting a larger role in the marketing decisions. Organic farming’s emphasis on community-based marketing allowed them to make up for their lack of involvement in the mechanical labor in this way to an extent that would have been impossible in conventional farming. In this way, though, they conformed to an essentialist view of gendered possibilities in terms of machinery use. They also challenged these norms in terms of their degree of direct involvement in farm management.

Most of the younger women, on the other hand, felt comfortable using machinery and, for the most part, were the primary operators of machinery. These women mentioned that when they decided that they wanted to learn how to use the machinery, they rarely faced personal trouble due to their gender. Instead, if they did face challenges in learning how to use the machinery, it was due to other peoples’ gender bias rather than their own gendered feelings of inadequacy. However, they overcame these objections.

One interesting example of a younger farmer’s challenge with machinery had to do with an internalized gender stereotype that she was unaware of. Daphne mentioned that there was recently an instance in which her husband, Don, critiqued her for expecting him to fix the tractor. “You are just as knowledgeable of tractors as I am!” he said. In the interview, Daphne stated that she immediately realized that she had unintentionally believed there was sexist basis for her expectation that he would know how to fix the tractor. She went on to

laugh that at the time she had little sympathy for his critique because she was the one who was busy entertaining and feeding the children and had no time to be learning how to fix the tractor. I will return to this comment in my analysis section because it illustrates one of the important conflicts women face in fully participating in farming.

### Self and Community Identification as a Farmer

The small organic farmer, in comparison to a mono-cropped conventional farmer, is less likely to market directly to a grocery store or a large food company because they do not usually produce enough of one product on a consistent weekly basis. The organic farmers in my study market their products at farmers' markets, through CSA's, agro-tourism, and direct farmer-to-consumer relationships. A universal trend in these marketing techniques is that they encourage consumer-producer direct interaction. Researchers conclude that it is that women are drawn to organic farming not because organic farming is more "natural" but rather because the type of marketing associated with organic farming appeals to them.<sup>3</sup> My findings, however, do not show that the type of marketing is the primary factor in bringing Colorado women to organic farming. They do show, though, that this marketing is one of the reasons that they continue to enjoy organic farming.<sup>4</sup> Monica, for instance, never thought that she would enjoy going to the farmers' market to sell her produce because she tends to be a very shy person. Now, five years into farming, she is one of the leading organizers of the Paonia farmers' market and it is one of her favorite parts of organic farming.

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<sup>3</sup> These researchers reject the notion that it is an essential tendency to nurture or harmonize with nature that makes women opt for organic or sustainable farming. Yet the drive toward community — women's skill in building relationships and the idea that "women make the connections" between food, land, health and future generations — comes up frequently (Lipson 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Researchers reject the notion that it is an essential tendency to nurture or harmonize with nature that makes women opt for organic or sustainable farming [and instead that it is] the drive toward community (Lipson 2005).

All of the women in this study stated that in every interaction with customers at the farmer's market and on their farm they are considered farmers. This identification with their work production is an important source of identity for them, as workers and as part of a community of farmers.

### Knowledge

My findings suggest that, in general, organic farming movements value "women's" knowledge. When I asked the women in the study where they learned to farm organically they gave me a multitude of answers. Some women learned through experience. Susan, for example, was once connected with a "feminist nun" who grew an organic garden. Susan worked in the garden with her friend, finally deciding to start her own farm. Some of the women turned their own gardens into farms. Marcy, for example, was growing a garden in Colorado Springs, when she and her husband were inspired by author Joel Salatin (1991) and decided to buy land in Fowler and start their own farm. Many of the women learned by reading books on organic agriculture, and the younger women took agricultural classes in college and interned on farms. Chloe was actually an intern on Anna's farm and returned to become the Assistant Field Manager. In order to continue their education on farming practices, many of these women look to each other and other farmers in the area for expertise and mentoring. Anna, for instance, mentioned the difficulty that she faced when first moving to Colorado's front range after first learning to farm in Washington State. She turned to the older farmers in the area in order to find tips on how to deal with the scarcity of water, for instance.

All of the farmers mentioned that one did not have to go to agriculture school in order to become an organic farmer. Experiential knowledge, they believed, is actually a preferred education method because learning-by-doing is easier to apply to organic farming than learning-by-reading. When Max needs to learn something, for example, she will go a fellow farmer's farm when they are participating in that activity and will observe and volunteer to help in order to gain hands-on experience as well as to give something back for what she is gaining.

None of the women mentioned facing any challenges in accessing organic farming knowledge, yet I noticed patterns of male domination in spaces in which traditionally valued knowledge is passed within the organic agriculture community. This traditional valued knowledge includes science-based, empirical knowledge. The women in the study who attended conferences and workshops, for example, mentioned that, though they always felt that they had equal access to these areas, they certainly noticed a lack of female leadership at the conferences and specifically as keynote speakers. Sachs and Allen also noticed this trend in a larger national study of sustainable conferences:

At conferences on sustainable agriculture women are much more likely to be listening in the audience than speaking on the program, which will be overwhelmingly composed of men. This is despite the fact that women are prominent in organizing these conferences, coordinating community endeavors, and creating linkages among different sustainable agriculture groups (Allen and Sachs 1993, 150).

### Feminist Identification

Only two women in my study explicitly identified as feminists. In fact, all of the women I interviewed remarked that prior to the interview they had never thought of organic farming as a feminist practice, and many of them were not sure that they could define either

feminism or a feminist practice. Of the subjects that expressed any understanding of feminism (6 of 14), this understanding carried a negative connotation. The overall feeling of the women in this study was that being a feminist means somehow not being a woman and/or being a man-hater. Anna and Chloe (two of the younger farmers) mentioned that they did not feel that there was the same need for feminism now that there once was in the past. They did not recognize facing any challenges within organic farming due to their sex or gender.

Susan and Max were the only farmers who recognized that they were proud to be feminists and, after thinking about it, decided that farming was a feminist practice. I got the impression that Susan does not have the same negative connotations association with the word “feminist” because she is current on feminist theory and is comfortable with her understanding of feminism. Nellie mentioned that she was not sure what feminism meant these days, so she would not say that she was a feminist. “I’m *all woman*,” she said.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis**

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Having outlined my findings, in the following sections - knowledge; valuing women's work; dangers of essentialism; crossing traditional gender lines; family-farm ideal; and feminist identification - I will discuss parallels between the feminist themes outlined on pages 7-11 and my findings.

### Knowledge

The finding that organic farming values experiential and alternative knowledge parallels the feminist themes plurality and knowledge. As stated on page 10, feminists, such as Harding (1986), believe that knowledge is not just empirical and scientific, but that it is also experiential and intuitive. The valuing of "women's knowledge" within organic agriculture implies that organic farming believes in a feminist, alternative definition of knowledge.

Even though these findings suggest that organic agriculture in Colorado may be better than conventional agriculture in valuing multiple types of knowledge and in encouraging equal access to valued knowledge, there is still an absence of women in positions of power within established spaces in which valued knowledge is passed within organic agriculture. This poses a difficulty in defining organic agriculture as a feminist practice because, according to Spain, by limiting women's access to space, patriarchal communities can deny women access to knowledge (Trauger 2004, 296). The absence of women in traditional spaces of valued knowledge suggest that the organic farming system may not be any better than conventional farming at encouraging equity in these spaces.

### Valuing “Women’s Work”

The finding that organic agriculture values “women’s work” incorporates the feminist themes of plurality, connectedness and community. Organic agriculture allows the older women, who, in general, are heavily influenced by traditional gender stereotyping, to find a space in which their work can be equally held as a valuable part of farming. This valuing of “women’s work” is feminist because it encourages a more incorporative definition of what constitutes work. Also the women’s work that is valued in organic farming emphasizes connection and community. Farmers’ markets and CSA programs, which are organized by these organic women farmers, allow for the farmer to make close connections with the consumers and also encourage the consumers to become more connected with the environment in which the food is grown. These marketing techniques are also feminist because they value community building and community interaction.

### Dangers of Essentialism

One of the dangers with valuing this work as “women’s work” is that it suggests essentialist notions of gender formulation. Biologically-based gender definitions that may seem benign, can, in fact, be incredibly debilitating. A popular example of debilitating essentialist gendered notions is the thought that women are “naturally” bad in the areas of math and science. Harding (1986) further explains the dangers of biologically based essentialist gender definitions:

Oppressive reproductive policies; white men’s management of all women’s domestic labor; the stigmatization of, discrimination against, and medical ‘cure’ of homosexuals; gender discrimination in workplaces—all these have been justified on basis of sexist research and maintained through technologies, developed out of this research, that move control of women’s lives from women to men of the dominant group (407).

An essentialist gender notion that appeared in my study was the notion that women were not “naturally” as mechanically proficient as men. Women may rightly feel less comfortable with machinery for a number of reasons. Western, patriarchal, gendered societies do not expect and, usually, discourage women from working with and understanding mechanics. Because of this, many women have less experience with machinery and really might not know as much. This does not prove, though, that females are biologically less mechanically proficient. While “natural” is a word that is that is easy to toss around, especially when working with plants, it is important to remember that society and culture may be just as (or more) influential in defining human existence.

### Crossing Traditional Gender Roles

The feminist theme of plurality as it relates to gender definition is apparent in the findings that show that the younger women in this study were less influenced by traditional gender role stereotyping. One of the ways that the younger women showed that they believed less in essentialist notions of gender was on the issue of machinery. They all mentioned being comfortable with using the machinery after they were taught how to use it. When I asked if they had faced any challenges specifically within the organic agriculture community due to their gender, the women mentioned rarely facing any problems. One woman suggested that this might be true because the organic movement is so small that maybe people involved in the movement are willing to accept anyone who wants to be an organic farmer in order for the movement to grow. Perhaps this finding suggests that the organic agricultural community is helping to normalize women’s ability to participate in “men’s work” such as mechanical labor. It might also suggest, though, that this acceptance

of less traditional gender lines is a broader societal acceptance that has come about with the influence of past feminist movements, and is not necessarily specific to the organic agriculture community.

Organic farming makes transcendence of traditional gender stereotypes possible because it places women in non-traditional roles in public contexts. As Trauger points out, farmers' markets, in particular, are vital to these women's identities and sense of self-worth and to challenging traditional feminine gender stereotypes:

Public spaces of recognition and support are crucial not only for women to maintain their identities as farmers, but also for legitimating and valuing the work of women farmers, and providing a space of public representation and resistance to traditional constructs of farm women's femininity (2004, 301).

Therefore, as seen from the finding in my study, organic farming more than conventional farming encourages a broader understanding of what characterizes a farmer.

### Family Farm Ideal

All of the women farmers with children were the primary caregivers for their children. They were also the primary household caretakers as well as assuming responsibility for at least half of the hand labor on the farms. In my study, I found echoes of Sachs' (1996) finding that populist visions of organic agriculture tend to see the stereotypical heterosexual family farm as the ideal organizational structure for organic farming, while generally do not problematize gender relations that are integral to this structure. As Sachs writes, "[Sustainable agriculture] promotes the preservation of a family-farm based agricultural system, but does not complement this with a focus on reconfiguring problematic gender and racial relations that have been part of this structure" (1993, 145). The women in

my study emphasized a view of organic farming as more than just a business but, instead as a lifestyle, which includes, necessarily, the preservation of the family-farm system. The family-farm system is a system in which a farm is run as an extension of the family, with farming becoming the lifestyle and the lifestyle becoming farming.

While the traditional family-farm system incorporates the feminist theme of connectedness because it encourages a human connection to the environment, the family-farm system does not parallel other feminist themes. The common outcome of the traditional gender relations that exist within traditional family-farm systems is that women are doubly burdened, not only expected to do a large part (usually half) of the physical labor on the farm, but also expected to do the majority of the unpaid labor within the household. If the women are not doing a large part of the physical labor, then they are often taking a large part in the management and marketing labor. While it is true that the husbands take part in off-farm jobs in addition to farm labor in order to supplement the family income, these husbands were still not expected to do an equal amount of the child-rearing and household caretaking jobs.

It was very clear in my meetings, particularly with the mothers, that the organic farming lifestyle is very exhausting for most of my subjects. This illustrates a conflict women face in fully participating in farming. The organic farm women mentioned appreciating other women farmers, particularly other women farmers who are mothers, because these women understood the expectations that they collectively face. Even though they could recognize being overly burdened, it was not clear within my study that the women farmers I interviewed could pinpoint a connection between the traditional expectations of stereotypical gender roles and their own personal exhaustion and stress.

The organic women farmers in my study all mentioned a critique of the current American capitalist system in which food and the production of food is undervalued by our society. Capitalist societies define value monetarily. Food in America is especially cheap in ratio to the cost of production of the food. Theorist Claudia von Werlhof points out that in the Western patriarchal view “nature is everything that should be free, and/or as cheap as possible” (Mies and Shiva 1993, 26). The organic women farmers in this study mentioned having to constantly argue in support of the higher prices that they demand for their products because they believe that a higher value should be placed on healthy, humanistic, food production. Betsy Austin joked that she has a whole “spiel” that she has to always be ready to give to the customers who complain about the price of her produce at farmers’ markets.

I mention the farmers’ critique of Western, patriarchal, capitalist devaluing of nature in order to encourage these women to see the connection with this devaluing of nature and the devaluing of wives and mothers who’s work is considered “natural.” In continuation of the definition of nature as quoted above by Claudie von Werlhof, this Western patriarchal definition “includes products of social labour. “The labour of these people, their labour power – the ability to work – appears as a natural resource, and their products as akin to a natural deposit”” (Mies and Shiva 1993, 26). In a traditional heterosexual family, the mother’s caretaking work is devalued because it is considered “natural.” Therefore, in order for organic farming to definitively become a feminist or truly organic practice, organic farmers must question the heavy emphasis on traditional gender roles in the family-farm lifestyle that is such a large part of organic farming. Mies and Shiva (1993) state that in order for someone or something to be feminist it must recognize the connection “between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature” and that the “liberation of

women cannot be achieved in isolation, but only as a part of a larger struggle for the preservation of life on this planet” (14).

### Feminist Identification

The fact that the majority of organic women farmers in my study do not identify as feminists has little to do with whether or not organic farming is a feminist practice. In general, Western cultures have painted an ugly picture of feminism. To the uninformed public, feminism is a dangerous word with negative connotations. While this fact is frustrating and wrong, it does not mean that the definition of feminism has changed. My analysis above shows that these women are engaging in a practice that can be labeled feminist, and now, with more of an understanding of feminism, some may decide to identify as feminists.

My first hypothesis was that organic farmers might be sensitized and perhaps even inspired by to the feminist movement because their movement arose at the same time. What I found did not tend to confirm this hunch. While older organic farmers do have some understanding “second wave” feminism, that understanding where it existed was not positive. And even though the younger organic farmers often saw the importance of the “second wave” of feminism, these women tended not to see its theories as applicable to the current world situation. Perhaps with a better understanding of how feminism has evolved, and how sexism and patriarchy are still very prevalent in all cultures, these women can now see the importance of a current feminist movement. Maybe they can also, after reading this project, be proud that they are an integral part of a vital, at least potentially, feminist movement.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

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The overall purpose of this project was to explore why Colorado's women organic farmers are farming organically. Not only did I find that women were farming for a multitude of reasons, I ultimately concluded organic farming is a potentially feminist practice. Organic farming's recognition and acceptance of alternative knowledge, its valuing of women's work, its emphasis on community and connectedness, and its acceptance of a plurality of gender roles make organic farming a feminist practice. However in order for organic farming to definitively become a feminist practice, the organic movement and organic farmers must question the emphasis placed on a traditional family-farm system.

## **Chapter 7: Epilogue**

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She couldn't hear my knocking over the racing of a cattle auctioneer on the radio, so I let myself into her kitchen through the backdoor. The light in the room was low. I pulled out one of the kitchen table chairs and sat down. In her worn out blue jeans with a knife strapped to the belt and an old green sweatshirt with the words "Endangered Lifestyle" and pictures of a barn, a tractor and various farm animals, she leaned against the doorway six feet across from me and began talking. We stayed like that for what seemed like five minutes. In actuality it lasted closer to two hours. In a fruitless gesture I eventually pulled out a notebook and paper. Never will I forget those stories. In just two hours we bridged a sixty year generation gap. I listened, attempting to ask a question here or there, feeding off of every word. After a tour of the slaughter house and a rescue mission for a goat stuck with her head in the fence, I shook her hand and stepped into the driver's seat of my car. "So, tell me your name again." she says. There was no need for introductions or explanations. Just two women sharing the midday sun.

## **Chapter 8: Reflection**

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My project was a definite success in that I gained many personal goods from it. I became more confident and, therefore, a better interviewer as time passed. I was also impressed with the ease I found in networking. I remained excited about my project for the entirety of its length.

By far, my favorite part of the project was the awkward conversations about feminism that I shared with many of my subjects. It was incredibly fun and challenging to hash-out what feminism was and how it related to farming. I learned something new in every conversation and my interviewees did as well. I rarely wanted to end an interview. Often in our society women do not get a chance to just talk about what it is like to live as a woman. I know that I appreciated weeks of conversation about my existence in a frustrating society, and I am pretty sure that the women in this study enjoyed the conversation as well. Included in this project is a directory of the women that I interviewed. I hope that it can grow and become a source of support for all of the women involved. Recognizing that others share your hardships and your pleasures is sometimes all that is needed to get through the day. Conversations are one of the largest aspects of a successful movement.

There are several things that I would change if I did the project again. First of all, I would have a better understanding of how I defined feminism and feminist practices before I went into the interviews because many of the interviewees wanted to know my opinion while we were doing the interview, and I was unable to give them a very solid answer. Along the same lines, I would liked to have structured the project in a way in which the interviewees might not have known the question that I was trying to answer. The fact that they did know that I was studying feminism may have altered their answers to my questions.

After reading this project, I hope that consumers around Colorado will feel even a little bit more proud to spend that extra 30 cents on an organic apple from a farmer that they know in Paonia. Not only is organic farming a feminist practice, *supporting* local organic farming is a feminist practice. While I was privileged to receive college credit for essentially becoming an educated consumer, it does not take months to find out where your produce comes from. I encourage everyone to participate in feminist action by connecting yourselves with the women that bring them life.

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## **Installation Quotes**

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“Once you taste the real thing, nothing compares.”

“...and then I became a mother. It became that important to feed my children real food, fresh food, chemical free food.”

“You know it is such a spiritual thing for me. To be a part of that process.”

“They are always trying to remind me, ‘Well, look, Susan, its all about how we are going to make the most money. And I’m like ‘No’ (chuckle). But I mean for them it has to be. That is our goal...to maximize the profit for the farmers. And I’m like ‘No, its important to educate the people about why it is so important to grow the things the way we do and why it is important for them to buy locally and duh duh duh duh duh. And educate them about GMOs and why this is such a radical thing for them to shop (at the farmer’s market)’. And they’re like ‘No, Susan, those are things that are secondary but it is about how we maximize our profits.’”

“I mean this whole thing of calling our market a cooperative. To me that comes with a huge responsibility. Are we really cooperating with one another? (Pause) If we really want to get the most out of this lets, at least, try and not be undercutting one another. Let’s talk let’s (pause) and, um, I sensed that there was some discomfort with that. And the other thing is a cooperative to me says: you know, we are going to value as much as the end product-we are going to value the process. Process is important and relationships are important. And you know we are talking about building relationships between growers and customers and relationships between growers and growers. Are we just giving that lip service or is that really important to us?”

“They just think I’m nuts (pause) because they are there to make a living and you know I have to understand that. (pause) You know?”

“So I don’t know if I am much of a feminist farmer (pause) Sometimes I think I would be happier if I just grew for my own family and my own neighbors.”

“I used to always kid that it is still a good ole boys system (pause) like they were forming this farm group without us. And I felt like they were my Walmart. (chuckle).”

“Overachiever! (laughter) I was the one who would always work after hours. Foolish. You know I think the thing that makes farming successful for anybody, regardless of their experience or their age or the size of their operation, is their drive and their dream and their willingness to step up to the plate and do what needs to be done. And if you see something that needs to be done, just do it.”

“I think there is definitely a balance that needs to happen in a natural environment between pests and disease and production and the whole nine yards. And we get to see that on the farm.”

“Well, if you look at agriculture across the world it’s a woman’s field. Especially the agriculture that we do... Its not dominated by men, and its not just a one-person operation. Agriculture communities across the world are predominantly women, community-based except for the U.S. That’s unfortunate, but that’s what happened during the green revolution.”

(Laughter) What does that mean? What’s a feminist? (Laughter)

“You know I am not saying I don’t think people should be treated fairly and respected and all that stuff. But I think there are inherent differences that show up between men and women because we are a part of nature after all.”

“So sure, I can be feminist. Why not?”

“I think it is definitely a way to balance the sexes. Any kind of farming, even if it’s not organic. Because it’s about people working together and working towards the culmination of a product that is ultimately feeding people. And there is a lot of unification that happens out there.”

“So, I think that that demographic might be changing; or maybe it just always been the same for people doing small intensive stuff that we are doing. So, maybe women are just more interested in stuff like that. Or maybe women are just inherently more interested in stuff like that.”

“It was the church that really convinced us to live a rural life.”

“There are all these young guys who think they are really sensitive to women’s needs and they are worse than the ‘good-ole-boys’.”

“I had hungry kids.”

“Organic was a dirty word. They believed you couldn’t make money off it back then.”

“If (women) want good stuff, they grow it themselves.”

“If it’s killing the bug, what’s it doing to me and my children?”

“Women are being accepted more and more in non-traditional roles as equals.”

“There is creativity involved with herbs. It touches something deep down in the soul.”

“When I make my products there is no need for scientific calculations.”

“Grassroots is feminist.”

“I’m *ALL woman*. I don’t know how feminist is described now. I don’t like to define myself by labels.”

“Being female, we come from a place of integrity.”

“All the men were gone during the war and the gals had to take care of everything. You know, my partner once told me I got a degree in chickens.”

“In order to be a farmer you have to be a Jack of All Traits.”

“Women will never get the recognition they deserve because of the male ego. Smart women will handle the men and come out of the back door.”

“I pay attention to my ranching, I don’t follow the party line.”

“I do not use chemicals. I don’t use GMO’s. I stay with the way God created things. You can improve on nature, but you don’t change it.”

“I think what happened to me is they showed me pictures of starving kids.”

“I love my life. You know? I really love my life.”

“Conventional would never have entered my mind. (chuckle) I couldn’t stand the smell of that stuff.”

“We have a certainly remarkable group of organic growers. Corporate organic farming is entirely different.”

“Women just have more sense!”

“After the oldest two were born I was looking at what I was feeding them.”

“You have to have support in some way. You look at all the conventional guys...they get together at the coffee shop every morning and share information. It is not the same support, it has taken a while.”

“The majority of people have not thought about it. Not only the earth...what you put into your body, the kind of life (the farmers) live, where the food comes from...Maybe they don’t know that there is an alternative...They just listen to the experts.”

“I can’t get away. There is no one to do the chores.”

“You can’t regulate morality.”

## **Interview Questions:**

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When/How did you start farming?

Did you come from a farming family?

Where you formally trained in organic agriculture?

Have you faced any challenges as an organic farmer due to your gender?

What are the challenges?

Have you overcome those challenges?

How did you overcome those challenges?

How do you foresee overcoming future challenges?

Are there structures in place in the organic movement in Colorado that support women farmers specifically?

How do you define feminism?

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

How would you define a feminist practice?

Do you consider organic farming a feminist practice?

If yes, why is it a feminist practice?