

Episode Title: Women in Agriculture and Stress

Summary: Today, we speak with Dr. Carly Nichols, whose research focuses on stress in women in agriculture. She is an assistant professor at the University of Iowa in the Department of Geographical and Sustainability Sciences. Carly talks about her research findings and offers some resources for those who may be experiencing stress.

Expert: Dr. Carly Nichols

Episode Quote:

“Dr. Carly Nichols, whose research focuses on stress in women in agriculture, shares her findings and offers some resources for those who may be experiencing stress.”

– Matison Bentley, Host of FarmSafe Podcast Season 2

Transcript

00:03 M. Bentley

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share firsthand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

Today we are visiting with Dr. Carly Nichols, whose research focuses on stress in women in agriculture. She is an assistant professor at the University of Iowa in the department of geographical and sustainability sciences. In this episode, Carly will be talking about her research findings and providing some resources for those that may be experiencing stress.

Hey Carly! Thanks for joining us. Can you talk about how you became interested in working with women in agriculture?

00:41 C. Nichols

I became interested in researching women in agriculture from when I worked in India, actually, and I did a lot of work with farmers, and I saw that women were often doing the most of the work but weren't really consulted in a lot of decision making. And so, I started only interviewing women and found out they have a lot of really interesting perspectives that weren't necessarily reflected in what men were saying. And when I came here to Iowa, I also felt like that it would be good to understand the issues of women in Midwest agriculture.

M. Bentley

A closer look Carly's research lead her to focus on stress in women in agriculture since it is an issue within the state of Iowa.

01:22 C. Nichols

We learned a lot about the highs and lows of what our survey respondents and interview respondents said about being a woman in agriculture, but really like the gender specific challenges that women talked about that you know were stressful with having sort of the double duty expectations or in some cases triple duty expectations of having to be responsible for bottle feeding the calves and getting the crops in and out, and also having to get to the soccer game and do the child care work.

M. Bentley

Were there any findings that really stood out to you?

02:01 C. Nichols

It was interesting because a lot of assumptions that we had and assumptions in the literature was that it would be physically harder for women to do the farming, and there would be more concerns from getting injured or getting hurt by machinery. And we found

while, that was a concern among some people, many people thought that because everything was so technology-centered in this day and age. You know we have women has said you know anyone can sit and push a button and drive a combine you don't need to be this big, physically strong person necessarily.

M. Bentley

That is interesting! What kind of stress factors did you find for women?

02:40 C. Nichols

Women were more stressed about sort of the expectations that they maintain a very clean house all the time, and are always at every soccer game and, you know, concerns around food and the healthiness of the diet. And so, if a woman was doing both on-farm and off-farm tasks, that could be a source of stress. The number one most stressful thing on our stress inventory was juggling too many things.

M. Bentley

Trying to do a lot at once can certainly be stressful. Were there any findings where women were less stressed compared to men?

03:11 C. Nichols

One of the really interesting findings from the qualitative research was that women often express that they felt less stress about things like crop failure or equipment breakdown because they really felt like it wasn't reflection of them, and that they had these multiple sort of identities. So many of them identified very strongly as mothers. You know, when we talked about stress a lot of them talked about their children rather than agriculture and we have to remind, like this is a in relation to the farm. They say, you know, it's just this is where my stress energy goes basically like towards the kids. So that was really interesting, right, because all of this discussion around mental health among the farmers, many women felt it seemed like they were less tied to the identity of a farmer and that, like failure to be a farmer would somehow be a negative thing. Our analysis show that that was because they had these sort of like multiple identities that sort of allowed them to see their value and purpose even if one thing went wrong, so to speak.

M. Bentley

That is an interesting perspective. What else did you find?

04:23 C. Nichols

I would say that, like women also often didn't get treated very respectfully like if they went to the FSA office, or they went to the John Deere dealership, that if they weren't known already, if they were like you know it was a new person at the counter that he would automatically assume she was a farmer wife or that she didn't know anything and it could be very demeaning to women, especially women who have farmed their whole lives to be treated this way. Although the majority of women said you know it doesn't bother me, I don't dwell on it, it's not something that really like is preventing me. But it was still something you could tell with a source of stress in a way that they're not being like recognized as a farmer when they go into these spaces.

M. Bentley

Absolutely! And Carly, a few minutes back you mentioned double expectations. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

05:19 C. Nichols

So, these sort of double expectations that women who are doing farming are also like keeping all of their other sort of socially ascribed expectations perfect. And so that was a source of stress for women more than a sense of stress of getting sort of this discriminatory treatment in John Deere tractor shop. So, it's feeling like they were somehow failing in this other part of their life or feeling guilty that they weren't able to keep their house clean, or they weren't able to spend as much time with their children as they wanted to. I mean. So, I don't know if that's farming specific, but I think that the blurry line between home and farm in a lot of farm families makes it more complicated, and a difficult situation to navigate.

M. Bentley

Work-life balance can be hard to tackle! Can you talk about childcare within the farm families?

06:11 C. Nichols

So as far as childcare goes, a lot of people, you know, actually talked about the advantage of living on a farm was that it was often times near to grandparents, particularly because most of this farmland in Iowa was handed down behind generations, or a lot of it is right. So many people—again, this is not from the survey native, but from the qualitative interview data—said that, you know they found it to be a valuable thing or like a positive aspect of being a farmer, a woman in agriculture, was being able to raise their kids on the farm, and the sort of life lessons that one learned from doing farm work, and also, if they were in proximity to other family members, particularly grandparents, who might help with childcare. However, many women also did make you know job careerships to better suit their children's schedules.

M. Bentley

That is interesting. Did the women you talked with address limitations for their work on the farm?

07:14 C. Nichols

When we talked about farm safety in the interviews, women were pretty cautious. Right? And so, like women were pretty like knew with their limits were, and weren't gonna go past them. So, I have a lot of women say I really don't like driving the tractors at night like I can't do this whole farming at night thing. It's just too much for me, and a sense that one needs to be careful. Also, a lot of women who, sort of stopped doing cattle because maybe they lost the other able-bodied person who was able to do it like maybe their father became sort of disabled in old age or something, and they said it was just too scary to be loading and unloading the cattle without this other person if I had to stop. So I guess just like being really aware of your limit and you know I didn't ask these women if that was something that they had like learned somewhere but it was something that many of them articulated, which I guess was interesting, that they were like very aware of what their limits were and like it was not a question of going path to them.

M. Bentley

It's important to know your limits. Can you talk about the mental health findings?

08:24 C. Nichols

In terms of mental health and stress goes, I think that women have an interesting position because there's a lot less social stake about women sort of reaching out for social support and health than there is for men. And so many women talked about getting professional mental health services. And how that was actually a very positive thing in their family because it reduced the stigma, and it was something that they were trying to normalize for other people. Many people didn't really feel like you know they're stress warranted professional services which I have no idea whether or not it did, but not everybody sought professional services. But I think that there is in general, just through sort of the feminine identity, or women's social networks, more of a tendency to reach out talk to other mothers to have these sort of inbuilt systems of social support. So, this seems really critical and just being able to cope with these stresses, not feel isolated about it, put it in broader perspective.

M. Bentley

Carly recommended checking out the University of Minnesota's UMASH program called Cultivating Resiliency for resources on women in agricultural stress management. The link to the program can be found in our episode resources section.

Carly, what other sources of stress did your research identify?

09:47 C. Nichols

You know one thing that's interesting is I think that sometimes women worry about their husbands getting injured on their farm, and might stay up too late worried about that and so, women did talk about that and like how they had to draw boundaries with their husband and make sure their husband got the training ag safety, ag training procedures, and then they had to say, "I'm going to bed at 11 o'clock. I'm not staying up until he gets home because he's his own person, and I trust him." And so, sort of managing that own, your own worry or concern for someone else's safety was something people talked about a lot.

M. Bentley

Carly particularly pointed out farm partnerships of the participants in her study and how that relationship changes the dynamic of the farm.

10:31 C. Nichols

So yeah, I mean, I would say it's complicated because there's so many different types of farm partnerships and people that have, you know, hired people and people that have children who are involved, or people who farm with their husband and his brother, you know, like just so many different partnerships. But there were, you know, women who did drive the combine and did do like all of the farming, but they were few and far between, and most of them said they didn't know anyone else who were like them. Many more women doing livestock and cattle from cow-calf operations. That was much more common, much more common for the husband to do the crops and the woman to do the cow-calf operation.

M. Bentley

Carly's research continues to address women in agriculture and rural areas. We thank you for joining FarmSafe, Carly!

11:21 M. Bentley

Learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress, which may include things like trouble sleeping—both too much and not enough—headaches, stomach pain, trouble making decisions, mood changes and feeling hopeless. Check in with yourself and those around you— if you are feeling more than one of those you may want to make some changes. Take time to eat healthy and get sufficient sleep, take a break from social media and the news. Make time to do something you enjoy. Check in and connect with others— that social support is important.

M. Bentley

Check out the links provided in the episode resources section of our website which include safety information on today's topics.

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there's questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website, gpcah.org or email us.

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Episode Resources

- [Cultivating Resiliency](#)
- [GPCAH Mental Health](#)
- [988 Lifeline Info](#)
- [Nami.org](#)
- [Coping with Stress](#)
- [AgrAbility](#)
- [Stress on the Farm](#)
- [Find treatment.gov](#)
- [Mental Health Resources](#)
- [Farmer Mental Health](#)

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