

COMMENTARY

Women: The first farmers

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Psychologist Carl Jung (1959) used the term ‘feminine’ to describe intuition, representing unconscious and nonrational ways of knowing, thus relegating women to subservient roles. Contrary to this, Carol P. Christ (2020), a historian and theologian, states that women have always played key roles in society, including being the first farmers. This did not happen due to women’s mere intuition. As Christ elaborates, “Women did not wake up one morning [in the Neolithic era approximately 12, 000 years ago] with the intuition that if they planted seeds and watered them, crops would grow” (Christ, 2020, p. 9).

Although intuition would have been involved (as is the case with many modern scientific and technological discoveries) in the development of agriculture, scientists and inventors accept that intuition complements and is a precursor to rational thinking and scientific methodology. Being

the first farmers would involve women combining their intuition with careful observations of nature, selecting healthy seeds from wild crops and engaging in continuous “trial and error” in their efforts to grow better crops.

We are all familiar with the male hunter as the primary image of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of early humans. This image has been instrumental in reinforcing the view that only men were the providers of food and, eventually, were the first farmers. Despite this overwhelming narrative, many anthropologists and historians believe that women played a more significant role in developing agriculture (Macintosh et al., 2017).

Early in history, there was a division of labor, with males hunting and females gathering fruits, nuts, roots, and other edible plants (Dahlberg, 1983). Agriculture was the next natural step for women.

Left to Men, We Would Still Be Only Hunting

Humans roamed in and around forests and lived in caves as their understanding of the importance of selective and seasonal hunting grew during the

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Paleolithic period some 3 million years ago. All members of the group—males and females and some young children—needed to accompany hunting groups. Over time, however, pregnant women and new mothers realized that joining hunting parties during pregnancy and with young offspring is difficult (Brown, 1970). Their maternal instincts did not allow them to leave young ones in caves, for fear of them being eaten by other animals.

Women would have started thinking about alternative solutions. Observing a female mammal who would give birth to a young calf, which humans can eat later on and share with the rest of the group, would have been the idea that inspired the domestication of animals and, hence, the origins of agriculture.

The journey from rearing livestock to growing plants took place during the Paleolithic to the Neolithic period, probably around 10,000 BC (Bellwood, 2004). As noted by Christ (2020), it was not merely an intuition but a careful observation of a phenomenon over a period of time that led to the development of agriculture.

As settlements grew, women stayed together for longer periods of time while men went hunting. The knowledge accumulated over time while gathering roots, fruits, and edible plants would help women recognize the nutritional value of different plants and the weather conditions when they can grow them. These efforts led to the cultivation of plants, and women developed techniques to pass on the knowledge they accumulated from the lived experience of growing plants and food through songs and dances. There are folksongs passed by

females in almost all societies worldwide about planting, harvesting, and weather patterns.

Gender-based divisions started showing their influence when the plow was invented (Alesina et al., 2013). As the plow required physical labor, it led to a gradual takeover of farming by men worldwide. At the same time, property rights and land ownership also favored men. There are many communities where women continue to play a significant role in the decision-making process for farming. However, their influence gradually declined over the last 200 years as agriculture became modernized during the Industrial Revolution. Even though women account for more than 40% of the agricultural workforce globally, their role, contribution, and nuanced understanding of agriculture are not included in the decision-making process (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2023).

Agriculture requires an understanding and balance of natural (biodiversity, ecosystems), social (community networks, skills), and produced capital (production and profitability) (Sandhu et al., 2019). The focus of current intensive agriculture, predominantly led by men, is all about producing capital. Unsurprisingly, the social, health, and environmental costs of this intensive agriculture and food system are US\$12 trillion annually (FAO, 2024).

There is a need to revisit the role of women in today's agriculture and food systems and consider how this can lead to transitioning global agriculture and food systems to be more equitable and sustainable.

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