



THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER

JOHN IKERD

Sustainability: Part of the new women's movement

Published online February 24, 2017

Citation: Ikerd, J. (2017). Sustainability: Part of the new women's movement. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 7(2), 9–12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2017.072.004>

Copyright © 2017 by New Leaf Associates, Inc.

At recent local food conference in Toronto, Canada, I opened my presentation by commenting on the impressively large numbers of women, young people, and racial and ethnic minorities in the audience. I suggested that the stereotypical *old, white men* were not going to give up control of the food system without a fight, so we need to be prepared to take it away from them. When I sat down, a female fellow panel member remarked to me that the women's movement is very complementary to the sustainable food

John Ikerd is professor emeritus of agricultural economics, University of Missouri, Columbia. He was raised on a small farm and received his BS, MS, and PhD degrees from the University of Missouri. He worked in the private industry prior to his 30-year academic career at North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, the University of Georgia, and the University of Missouri. Since retiring in 2000, he spends most of his time writing and speaking on issues of sustainability. Ikerd is author of six books and numerous professional papers, which are available at <http://johnikerd.com> and <http://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdj/>

movement. I replied, almost without thinking, “The sustainable food movement *is* a women's movement.” I perhaps should have called it a *women-led* movement, for the sake of accuracy.

Even in the early 1990s, I had observed that leadership positions in sustainable agriculture educational programs were dominated by women. At an educational event hosted by a Native American tribe in Idaho, male and female participants were asked to sit at separate long tables for the evening meal—as was traditional for the tribe. We were to fill the chairs from the front toward

*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer**? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. I spent the first half of my academic career as a free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. During the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn't working and wasn't going to work in the future—not for farmers, rural communities, consumers, or society in general. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark the needed revolution in economic thinking.*

the back of the room. I quickly noticed that the women's table was filled to a length more than twice as long as the men's table.

Many of the sustainability program leaders in universities, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations are and have been female. Sustainable-minded farmers may still be mostly male, but the numbers of women farmers are growing. Young women farmers are providing leadership for national young farmer organizations such as the National Young Farmers Coalition (National Young Farmers Coalition, n.d.) and The Greenhorns (The Greenhorns, n.d.). The 5th Annual Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference brought more than 300 women farmers, ranchers, and educators together in Portland, Oregon, in 2016 (Adams, 2016). At events I attend in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere, the leadership of the sustainable/ local food movement tends to be dominated by women.

I believe many women have always been interested in farming and food-related issues, where positions of leadership traditionally have been reserved for men. Sustainable agriculture is seen by many of these men as a challenge to their positions of male privilege because it challenges their male-dominated way of farming. This has left opportunities open for bright, articulate, motivated women of all ages to take on leadership responsibilities. I believe also that the guiding principles and characteristics of sustainable farms and food systems are more in harmony with personality traits of females than males. Industrial agriculture is about forcing nature to produce more cheap commodities, whereas sustainable agriculture is about nurturing nature so it can produce enough good food.

I'm certainly not an expert on feminism. However, the global women's protest against President Trump's inauguration has returned public attention to the ongoing women's movement (Booth & Topping, 2017). During the late 19th and early 20th

century, the first wave of the movement addressed women's suffrage and other legal inequalities. The second wave, begun in the 1960s, focused on removing cultural and economic inequalities. The third wave, starting in the 1990s, expanded on the second wave by embracing religious, ethnic, and cultural differences among women. The new "Fourth Wave" of feminism, which emerged in the early 2000s, has been described as a "fusion of spirituality and social justice reminiscent of the American civil rights movement and Ghandi's call for nonviolent change.... At its heart lies a new kind of political activism that's guided and sustained by spirituality" (Peay, n.d., para. 2).

Some social scientists associate the Fourth Wave with the emergence of social media, which has allowed the women's movement to become a multi-ethnic global movement—empowering women around the world. Perhaps more importantly, social media have allowed the Fourth Wave to evolve without needing a single leader or set of female icons to speak for the movement. Women have been able to speak publicly for themselves, as well as to find and join a diversity of shared voices. This makes the women's movement more resilient and more difficult to coopt or suppress than ever before. I believe the current women's movement reflects a natural progression from equality, to identity, to empowerment, to leadership. Many women now seem to understand that the personality traits commonly associated with being female are the traits most needed for leadership at this time in human history.

Psychologists tend to rely on the "Big Five" personality traits to define gender differences (Weisberg, DeYoung, & Hirsh, 2011). They are Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Openness/Intellect. Women tend to rank higher in *neuroticism*, which is generally associated with anxiety and self-consciousness. But related traits such as emotionalism and sensitivity

Industrial agriculture is about forcing nature to produce more cheap commodities, whereas sustainable agriculture is about nurturing nature so it can produce enough good food.

can also sharpen intuition and insight. Males tend to be more rational and ideological, which can lead to conceit and rigidity. Women consistently rank higher for *agreeableness*, which is associated with empathy, altruism, and kindness. Men tend to be more egocentric, self-centered, and indifferent.

Women also rank higher in *conscientiousness*, which is associated with organization and self-discipline. Men tend to be more opportunistic and sporadic. Women rank only slightly higher in *extraversion*, as they relate more comfortably with others. Men are inclined to take more social risks. No significant gender differences have been found for *openness/intellect*, which reflect imagination, creativity, and intellectual curiosity. However, the focus of imagination, creativity, or exploration may well be different for men and women. These gender differences obviously do not apply to all women or men, which is confirmed by various studies showing significant overlap along the gender trait continua.

Regardless, the gender traits generally associated with being female are far more consistent with the requisites for sustainability than those of males. Old, white men have had a natural leadership advantage in the *mechanical* world envisioned during the Enlightenment and imposed upon the world during the industrial era of economic development. We now know that world is not sustainable. The worldview essential for sustainability is that of a resourceful, resilient, regenerative living organism rather than an inanimate mechanism. Living things must be conceived, nurtured, cared for, and renewed rather than built, managed, worn out, and discarded. Creating a sustainable food system is much more like raising a child than building an automobile. Communities and societies are sustained by considerate, cooperative, collaborative, consolatory, caring, compassionate relationships. The aptitudes, talents, and skills needed for sustainability are far more consistent with the

gender traits of females than males.

At the deepest level, the sustainability movement is a morally rooted movement born of a growing sense of our responsibility to take care of each other and to care for the earth. It represents a “fusion of spirituality and social justice.” Sustainability will require a “new kind of political activism that’s guided and sustained by spirituality.” Hillary Clinton’s loss in her bid for the U.S. presidency was a deep disappointment for the women’s movement. She likely lost the votes of many old, white, men who felt threatened by the thought of a woman president. She probably lost the votes of even more who feared she would accommodate the “establishment”—the old, white, men. Many of today’s women political leaders were elected because they lead like old, white men. I believe the American people ultimately will elect a woman president who has the courage to think and lead like a woman. I believe the sustainability food movement ultimately will succeed because is an essential part of a global women-led movement that is creating a better future for humanity.

Creating a sustainable food system is much more like raising a child than building an automobile. Communities and societies are sustained by considerate, cooperative, collaborative, consolatory, caring, compassionate relationships.

References

- Adams, A. (2016, December 20). Women in sustainable agriculture [blog post]. Retrieved from the Holistic Management International blog: <https://holisticmanagement.org/blog/women-in-sustainable-agriculture/>
- Booth, R., & Topping, A. (2017, January 22). Two million protest against Trump’s inauguration. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jan/22/two-million-protest-against-trumps-inauguration-worldwide>
- Greenhorns, The. (n.d.). About us. Retrieved 2/16/17 from <http://www.thegreenhorns.net/category/about/aboutus/>
- National Young Farmers Coalition. (n.d.). Who we are. Retrieved 2/16/17 from <http://www.youngfarmers.org/about/who-we-are/>

Peay, P. (n.d.). Feminism's spiritual wave [Blog post]. Retrieved from the Feminist.com blog: <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/insp/spiritualwave.html>

Weisberg, Y. J., DeYoung, C. G., & Hirsh, J. B. (2011). Gender differences in personality across the ten aspects of the Big Five. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2, 178. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00178>