

Case Study: Women in Agriculture



Dawn Destor-Mackinnon is a contract shepherdess who works in Argyll. She comes from a farming background but as she does not have a family farm to work on she has worked hard to build her reputation and secure work. She trains her own dogs and enjoys working on different farms. Here she tells us about her working life and what she enjoys about it.

Tell us a bit about your background and farming career.

'I am a contract shepherdess based in Argyll, Scotland. I am self-employed so have built up my own contracting work on various farms. I was brought up on a small upland farm running about 250 cross ewes. Ideally when the time comes, I would like to run a flock around 600-800 breeding ewes on an upland or hill farm. My dad was a shepherd so I grew up around sheep. After completing a degree at university in art, I decided I wanted to go back to working in agriculture, as it is what I am passionate about and love doing. Originally, as a contractor, I took any seasonal work going, which mostly involved wool handling for shearing contractors both in Scotland and abroad. However, I got the opportunity to start working on hill farms and training dogs, which has become the work I do and love now.'

What is your favourite part of farming?

Being outside, working with stock, especially gathering out on a hill environment with my team of dogs. It is the most spectacular office anyone could ask for.

Have you ever come across sexism in farming?

'Very rarely. Once or twice when I first started out, but when people can see you are able to do the job I haven't come across any bias.'

Do you think things are changing in UK

agriculture for women?

'Yes definitely! So many of the women I work with are successful shepherdesses, contractors or active partners in their farms in their own right. I am still forever grateful however for all the women who are or choose to be the 'farmer wife' role and keep everyone going.'

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What are your goals and aims for your business?

'To continue building up work and contacts more locally, as the nature of the job is seasonal and the demand for work varies throughout the year. To have my own farm yet still be able to do some contract shepherding work. Contracting allows me to work in various locations, see new ideas put into practice and forever learn better ways of doing things, which I can take back and apply to my own place and work. For me, that is the dream and the best of both worlds!'

What are your goals and aspirations for yourself?

‘To be confident in my abilities and ideas both in doing my own projects as well as the work I do for employers.’

Have you implemented any changes on the farm recently? If so, what were they and why?

‘My dogs are vital for much of the work I do and without them I couldn’t do this kind of work, so last year I was encouraged to start competing in the sheep dog trials by one of my friends who is a very experienced and successful shepherdess and dog trainer herself. It has forced me to work on my handling skills and not just wing it and hope for the best.’



Are you interested in the environment? If so, what measures do you have on the farm to encourage biodiversity?

‘Yes I am interested in the environment and how we can farm alongside it, especially for the bad press and blame the agricultural industry is receiving for its part in the contribution to climate change. I am interested in hill farming for its low

input and how beneficial its practices are to the land and wildlife. It is something I would hope to promote and work with on my own place eventually.’

Do you have any farm diversification enterprises? If so, what are they and who runs them?

‘As a contract shepherdess working in the industry, I love how great and versatile sheep are. I work a lot with Scottish blackfaces which the wool doesn’t have that much value in the industry. Recently, some talented friends of mine have been using some fleeces we had shorn to create beautiful woven blankets. It is creating projects with people like this that I am interested in who are able to utilise this product from some wild wee Scottish hill sheep. I have always been told not to put all your eggs in one basket so while sheep and dogs are my passion, I would also like to be a lot more self-sufficient and produce more local produce such as veg, chickens and pigs.’

What do you think your farm does well?

‘The best thing I learned from working with my dad on his farm was his daily attention to livestock welfare, the quality of environment they were kept in and the calm nature with which they were handled, all of which was reflected in the good quality of stock he had. It is something I find incredibly important and apply to my own practices wherever I can.’

What are the constraints to where you are farming?

‘The unpredictability of work and the struggle I currently have in looking for that break or opportunity for land to start my own project.’

What are you particularly proud of in your farm?

My dogs. They are essentially my work colleagues and I put a lot of work into training them for the work we do.

For further information about the Women in Agriculture work being done by the Farm Advisory Service, including information on discussion groups, head to www.fas.scot or contact us on 0300 323 0161.

