

Case Study: Women in Agriculture



Helen Smith is a farmer's wife and mum of 2 young children (aged 6 and 3). She farms with her husband, his parents and brother on a tenanted farm in Moray. It is a mixed beef cattle, sheep and malting barley farm. They have recently added bed and breakfast pigs, and are expanding their farm venue which aims to educate the public on Scottish farming. Here she tells us about her life in agriculture.

Tell us a bit about your background and farming career.

'I have always been a farming girl. I was a farmer's daughter and when I left school I studied Rural Land and Business Management at Aberdeen University. I then became a Rural Chartered Surveyor. When we had children I made the decision to stay at home and bring up our children while supporting my husband on his family farm. We then decided to set up an on farm venue, bringing children onto the farm to educate them on farming and where food comes from.'

How did you get into farming?

'It's in my blood. I think if you are born into farming there is a high chance you will be drawn back to it at some point in your life. I can't imagine having a desk job or a Monday to Friday job. Farming is a way of life though and it would be pretty awful if you didn't really enjoy it.'

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Have you ever come across sexism in farming?

'Of course I have, it is a male based industry and

men always think they are being funny, but most of the time it is just tongue in cheek stuff. As a rural surveyor I had a few interrogations from clients just to check I actually knew what I was talking about before they would deal with me. One client even said, "Aye you seem to cain your stuff for a Quine!" You just have to shrug it off and do the best job you can.'

Do you think there are equal opportunities for women and men in agriculture in the UK?

'Yes and no. There are the same opportunities available for women but we probably have to justify ourselves and prove ourselves a bit more. Our three year old daughter has it totally sorted in her head. The other day at the dinner table she was asked if she wanted to be a teacher when she grows up. She replied saying "no, a farmer!" My husband said, "great are you going to be a lady farmer?" Her response was, "no, just a farmer, a proper farmer!" She will certainly not be standing for any sexism in agriculture and will be leading the way for equal opportunities.'

How do you think things are changing in UK agriculture for women?

'Without sounding pathetic, technology is making it much easier for women to be full time farmers as it can help with a lot of the heavy work. I think there are also more enterprises on farms these days which lots of women manage along side the traditional farm. However in order for a traditional male farmer to be successful it helps to

have a great wife/woman at home. What may seem like trivial jobs can make a huge difference to the smooth operation of a farming business. I certainly have had the role of taking meals to tractors and combines at busy times, to keep the wheels turning; running to the local garage and pick up spare parts at a minute's notice; escorting the combine along the roads at harvest; moving livestock etc.'

What are the biggest challenges for Scottish farmers at present?

'The obvious answer would be the uncertainty of Brexit! However I think the truth is the biggest challenge for farmers is mind set. We must try to stop thinking like farmers and more like business people who can fully utilise all their assets.'

What are your goals and aims for your business?

'To establish our on farm venue at our new farm and offer more on farm experiences to the general public. Continue growing all enterprises of the business to provide a good quality of life and income for all the families involved.'

Have you implemented any changes on the farm recently?

'Our major change was taking on a new tenancy for a 400ac arable farm last year. This has meant a house move for us and moving our on farm venue to new premises. The tender process itself was a great opportunity to really look at our business and evaluate the good bits and the bad bits. It was following this process we decided to move forward expanding our on farm venue business and increasing livestock numbers, and malting barley acres.'

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

'We have been growing mulch crops on our arable land for the last 5 years. We have seen huge benefits to the soil structure, soil biota and in turn crop yields. We have also planted thousands of metres of hedges over a number of schemes which

are now reaching maturity and are full of wildlife while also providing shelter for our livestock and a windbreak for sand blow and soil erosion.'

Do you have any farm diversification enterprises?

'We have an on farm venue which I manage. We hold weekly preschool groups and teach them about what's has been happening that week on the farm. The kids get to see the animals and machinery in a safe and controlled environment on a real working farm.



It is amazing how interested both the children and their parents are in learning about farming. It is also a little bit shocking as to how little they know – last year one adult asked me what the giant green machine in the yard was. The answer was a combine! We also accommodate school groups, birthday parties and hold ticketed open days.'

What are you particularly proud of in your farm?

'Our ability to "think outside the box" . My husband, his brother and parents are willing to try different things, based on their own research. I am pretty sure lots of our neighbours thought we were mad when we started growing mulch crops, we had comments like "why would you grow something to just plough up?", "do you not even graze it?". We have also just bought a tracked tractor which is not common in our area, our reasoning is to reduce soil compaction so we shall wait and see the results.'

What are the constraints to where you are farming?

'The main constraint is definitely the availability of land available to the tenanted sector. However we have been successful in securing additional land over the last few years.'

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.

