Women are transforming the agricultural industry in many ways

When Amanda Hammond-O’Connell decided to take over her family’s dairy farm in Carleton Place, Ont., she didn’t realize running her family’s business would become an addiction. “I just wanted to have something of my own,” she says. “Once my husband and I made the decision to take over the farm, I was hooked. I thought about all the things I could change to make the farm better and more efficient.”

When the owners began making those changes and seeing all the positive results, it was like a drug, she says. “It was the best feeling in the world. Now that we’re more established, it’s about the little things—dealing with challenges of getting better pregnancy rates or producing more litres of milk,” she says.

Initially, Hammond-O’Connell says her brother was supposed to take over the family farm, but instead, this ambitious farmer took the leap to become the third-generation dairy farmer at Sunol Farms Ltd.

After Hammond-O’Connell graduated from the University of Guelph, she was working for a seed company when she decided to buy her grandfather’s share of the family farm. She brought in her husband, Jason, and together they own 50 per cent of the farm, with her father owning the other 50.

The team milks 130 Holsteins in a freestall barn that was built after a fire destroyed their original tiestall in 1992. Originally milking using a double 8 herringbone parlour, the owners installed two Lely A4 robots three years ago, and a third robot last year. They grow corn, soybeans, wheat, alfalfa, and grass hay on more than 2,000 acres of land.

“There have been men in the industry who have treated me like I was inferior, but there have also been women who have treated me the same way. In the end, we just don’t deal with those people—we prove them wrong.”

- Amanda Hammond-O’Connell
Women are transforming the agricultural industry in many ways. Not only is Hammond-O’Connell passionate about running her own dairy farm, but seeing her hard work produce results is what motivates her to continue.

“Ultimately, it’s about making something from start to finish—planting the seed, calving the cow, nurturing it, feeding it and producing a product that helps feed the world.”

Hammond-O’Connell and her husband work on the farm full time, while her father works spring to fall. They have one full-time herdsman who works in the barn, a full-time machine operator, and a student worker. Hammond-O’Connell makes all the decisions on the farm, along with her husband and father.

“We trust each other to make decisions the others would support,” she says. “Jason and I are very blessed to work with someone like my dad who has given us free rein to do as we please.”

And as a woman working in a male-dominated industry, having a strong support system helps her during challenging times.

“When I first started farming, people definitely assumed I was not a decision-maker or owner,” she says. “There have been men in the industry who have treated me like I was inferior, but there have also been women who have treated me the same way. I’m not sure which makes me more frustrated.”

She says there will always be people who will treat female farmers differently.

“In the end, we just don’t deal with those people—we prove them wrong,” Hammond-O’Connell says, adding women working in agriculture tend to form a community to support, encourage and challenge one another. “I think part of that is because we are the minority and we want other women to succeed.”

While Hammond-O’Connell says she feels dairy farming is still male dominated, more women are joining the industry every year. And raising two girls, six-year-old Margaret and three-year-old Mackenzie, the family might close the gap even more.

Margaret loves tractors and will sit there for hours spraying, planting and combining,” Hammond-O’Connell says. “Mackenzie is our barn girl. She loves all animals and is our number one calf feeder and bottle washer.”

Hammond-O’Connell hopes to be a female role model for her daughters just as her grandmother was her role model. Growing up, she often watched her grandmother milk cows, feed calves and drive tractors, but back then, she was not a decision-maker on the farm and was never considered a farmer, Hammond-O’Connell says.

“Overall, I have always been surrounded by strong women who stood up for what they believed in and did what made them happy,” she says. She has met many women in agriculture through her time at Kemptville College, University of Guelph, various meetings and different organizations.

“The most important ones in my life are the ones who are in the same position as me,” she says. “They understand what it’s like to survive on little to no sleep, go back to work the day after you have a baby, have no work-life balance, and more often than not, smell like manure.”

Today, not only does Hammond-O’Connell dairy farm, she also sells Dow seeds to other farmers in the area. As a part owner of Sunol Farms, she says her main goal is to continue improving the operation, and she has already been recognized for her efforts.

In 2012, Holstein Ontario awarded her with the Dairy Youth Award, and in 2014, Hammond-O’Connell and her husband received the Outstanding Young Farmers Award for Ontario.

“Since then, we have been blessed with a lot of great opportunities in the agriculture industry, but the best thing is the networking,” she says. “We have met women and men from across Canada involved in agriculture and have learned so much from them.”

She says the best advice she would give to other women looking at a career in agriculture is to remain positive and focus on the good aspects of the industry.

“Farming is full of ups and downs, and as farmers, we seem to focus on the negative,” she says. “Take a minute, learn from mistakes, and move on to the next challenge. I think women are great multitaskers, and in the world of farming it’s a great asset. I think we are also patient, and can take a step back and re-evaluate situations.”
Q: Can you outline your educational/professional background?
A: I spent two years at the University of Saskatchewan pursuing a bachelor's degree in agriculture, majoring in animal science. I completed my prerequisites for the veterinary medicine program and was accepted into Western College of Veterinary Medicine where I completed a doctorate of veterinary medicine. After spending two summers working for Greenbelt Veterinary Services in British Columbia as a student, I was offered a full-time position as an associate veterinarian when I graduated. I spend my days working with a variety of farm animals. I usually start the morning doing herd health visits at our dairy farms. I also work with other animals, including horses, sheep, goats and the occasional pig. Mixed in with regular appointments are emergency calls for calvings or sick animals. These calls keep the days interesting since you don't always know what to expect.

Q: How and why did you decide to get into your field?
A: I was interested in veterinary medicine from a young age, which came from interactions with our farm vet when they were around for herd health and emergencies. As university approached, I decided to focus my efforts on being accepted into a veterinary medicine program. I knew it would be the right route for me since I had a passion for working outside with animals and I like seeing the relationship veterinarians form with their farmers.

Q: Can you outline some of your accomplishments/projects you’re proud of?
A: In my final year of veterinary school, I was awarded the Zoetis Animal Health Dr. Otto Radostits Award, which is given to the final year veterinary student who has shown the greatest aptitude and performance in the area of food animal medicine. It meant a lot to me since I was very passionate about entering the field of food animal medicine, with a major focus on the dairy industry.

Q: Are there many other women who work in this field?
A: There are an increasing number of women who work as large animal veterinarians. The demographic in veterinary school classes has shifted to being predominately female, so we are seeing that shift within different fields of veterinary medicine as well.

Q: What challenges do you encounter working in the agricultural field?
A: I initially experienced the “small size” stereotype, especially since I am not a big person in general. However, I’ve found the more farmers get to know me and my abilities, it doesn’t become an issue. I’ve learned different tricks from my own experience and the experience of other female veterinarians that have helped me work “smarter and not harder” in certain situations.

Q: Are you involved in any women in agriculture associations?
A: I am not involved in any women in agriculture associations specifically. I’ve found it beneficial to be a part of the Western Canadian Association of Bovine Practitioners. Through this group, I’ve been able to attend conferences where I can meet other female bovine veterinarians and discuss different challenges.

Q: What strong characteristics do women bring to agriculture?
A: I believe women have patience and attention to detail that benefits them in agriculture. Women are also compassionate toward both the people and animals involved in the industry.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your personal life?
A: I’ve been married for almost a year. My husband, Craig, and I moved to B.C. with our two dogs. We enjoy hiking, camping and fishing. I was fortunate to grow up on a dairy farm in Dewdney, B.C. It was a great experience, and I feel that background has helped me transition into working as a herd veterinarian.

Q: How are you able to juggle your career with your personal life?
A: I’m lucky to work at a very family-oriented veterinary clinic where the owners value and support their employees having a balance between work and personal life. It’s a fun area to work in and the people in agriculture are incredible to develop relationships with.
Q: Can you outline your educational/professional background?
A: I attended the agriculture diploma program at the University of Manitoba, and was offered a job at Paterson Grain—a grain/crop inputs company—four months before graduating university. I’ve worked at Paterson for two years as a sales agronomist. I scout fields, give recommendations on chemical, fertilizer, time, etc., and sell products.

Q: How and why did you decide to get into your field?
A: I decided to specialize in agronomy because at the time, it was hard to get a job in the animal side of agriculture. I was lucky to grow up on a dairy and grain operation because it allowed me to experience both sides. Growing up, I was actively involved in the barn and field but I wanted to experience work life off the farm and gain knowledge I couldn’t gain at home.

Q: How and why did you decide to become an advocate?
A: I have always advocated for agriculture whether talking to friends at school, sharing pictures or having people come see our farm. In university, I discovered I really loved to speak about agriculture when I shared a video of our farm on social media. It’s very important to me to share stories and pictures because media have a different view of farming.

Q: Can you outline some of your accomplishments/projects you’re proud of?
A: One of my biggest accomplishments was creating a video that went viral on Facebook. It was shared more than 320 times and received more than 38,000 views. The video caught the attention of professor Kevin Folta from Florida, and I ended up doing some podcasts and speaking at an event with him. Other accomplishments include graduating university, accepting a full-time job months before graduation, being asked to speak at conferences, and being appointed the Ag More Than Ever ambassador for Manitoba.

Q: Are there many other women who work in this field?
A: Agriculture is a male-dominated industry, but there are definitely more women entering the industry. I know it is a challenge in some areas of agriculture because there are some who still underestimate women. Women have many qualities that are beneficial to the industry, and it is great to see more women working in agriculture every year.

Q: What challenges do you encounter working in the agricultural field?
A: The company I work for is extremely supportive of women in agriculture. There are many farmers who are fine with having a woman work on their farm, and some farmers even prefer to deal with women. Growing up, I remember farming friends saying women are meant to be the cooks in the house and men are meant to work outside. I’ve also heard the stereotype women aren’t strong enough to do a man’s job. People need to accept the fact the industry has changed, and women are running farms, retail stores, banks, etc.

Q: Are you involved in any women in agriculture associations?
A: I’m not involved in any associations, but I try to attend conferences when I can, as well as read articles written by women in the agriculture industry. It’s hard to pick just one woman that I look up to, but I know blogger Lesley Kelly is someone I stay in touch with and try to learn from. She has accomplished so much as an advocate and a woman in the industry.

Q: What strong characteristics do women bring to agriculture?
A: Women in agriculture have many important qualities, including mothering qualities when taking care of animals. Women are also organized, hardworking and detail oriented. This industry is successful because of the men and women involved. Both have different qualities, which help both genders succeed.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your personal life?
A: I grew up on a dairy and grain farm near Meadows, Man., where we milk 750 purebred Holsteins, and farm 7,500 acres of cropland. Throughout high school, I fed calves and did field work, and I also spent two summers working at a strawberry patch. I’m 22 years old and still live on the farm. My dream is to be a part owner of our farm one day, but right now, I am enjoying learning and meeting new people in my day job.
Q: Can you outline your educational/professional background?
A: I received a bachelor of science in biology at the University of Prince Edward Island, master of science in biology at Laval University, PhD in agricultural microbiology at Laval University, and postdoctoral fellowships at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and Health Canada. I have more than 22 years of teaching and research experience in food microbiology, biotechnology and food applications of microbial molecular genetics, using systems approaches for studying microbial ecology. I worked as a professor at Laval University from 1995 to 2014, and became director of the department of food science and nutrition from 2010 to 2014. In 2015, I joined the department of food science at the University of Guelph (U of G) as Dairy Farmers of Ontario’s (DFO) professor in dairy microbiology. In 2016, I was awarded the NSERC/DFO Industrial Research Chair in dairy microbiology at U of G.

Q: How and why did you decide to get into your field?
A: I've always wanted to be a biologist but I was more interested in applications, so agriculture seemed a natural choice. I was captivated by all the uses of microbes, from improving plant growth to fermentations. Now, this interest has expanded to how our gut microbes influence health.

Q: Can you outline some of your accomplishments/projects you’re proud of?
A: My research aims toward understanding how food components modulate metabolic activities of microbiota in food and human microbial ecosystems. My goal is to improve the quality and functionality of food, focusing on milk and dairy products. I am particularly proud of achieving $4 million in funding this year for projects over a five-year period.

Q: Are there many other women who work in this field?
A: In the food science undergraduate program, there are more women than men. However, only three women are professors right now in food science at U of G.

Q: What challenges do you encounter working in the agricultural field?
A: Working in this field, I see the typical stereotype of women as being conciliatory. I think men expect compromise from women. I learned how to say no but it took a long time. You need to have confidence in yourself.

Q: Are you involved in any women in agriculture associations?
A: I am a member of scientific organizations, mostly in microbiology and food science. These organizations encourage interests in science for women, and try to bridge the gender gap. They also encourage women in leadership roles.

Q: What strong characteristics do women bring to agriculture?
A: Women have the strong ability to see things from different perspectives. To propagate another stereotype in a positive way, women are also nurturing, which is a strong characteristic they bring to agriculture.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your personal life?
A: My partner also works in agriculture with an expertise in animal reproduction. I was never far from agriculture as a child since we often visited farms.

Q: How are you able to juggle your career with your personal life?
A: I am not a good role model for keeping a balance between career and personal life. Sometimes the choices are difficult, and having a supportive family is a blessing.

Q: What advice do you have for other women looking at a career in agriculture?
A: Rely on yourself and speak up.
Q: Can you outline your educational/professional background?
A: I obtained a bachelor of science in agriculture from the University of Saskatchewan in 2007, majoring in animal science and minoring in rangeland resources. I have worked for the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture since May 2007, and am currently a livestock and feed extension specialist in Swift Current, Sask. I assist producers with nutrition and production issues, as well as help organize livestock extension events throughout the province. I also work with producers on projects related to new practices and technologies in the livestock sector.

Q: How and why did you decide to get into your field?
A: I grew up on a farm and have always been passionate about agriculture. It was a natural fit for me.

Q: Can you outline some of your accomplishments/projects you’re proud of?
A: I am proud to have a great professional career in agriculture and still be actively involved in primary production. I have been involved in hosting great livestock extension events, and I’m particularly proud of our Celebrating Rural Ranching Women event, where we provide a learning opportunity to ranching women. Some other events I’ve been a part of are Foraging into the Future and the Ranch Management Forum. I enjoy any time I’m able to help a producer with an issue.

Q: Are there many other women who work in this field?
A: There are 10 livestock and feed extension agrologists throughout Saskatchewan. We have a fairly even distribution of male and female counterparts, which is great.

Q: What challenges do you encounter working in the agricultural field?
A: For the most part, I am treated with respect in my role. Most producers accept there are a lot of female agrologists in the industry. However, there are times when I will run into a coworker, someone in the industry or a producer who treats me differently because I’m a woman, but it’s not very often. I’ve learned as women, we need to support each other and demand respect because we have every right to be in the agriculture industry.

Q: Are you involved in any women in agriculture associations?
A: In Saskatchewan, we have Saskatchewan Women in Ag. It does great things for women in this province, including putting out a calendar, which I was in with my daughter, sister and nieces this year. Proceeds from the calendar go toward scholarships, supporting Agriculture in the Classroom and putting on networking events. I have also helped plan an event in conjunction with Rural Women’s Month in March called Celebrating Rural Ranching Women. This event provides technical information on livestock and forages to women.

Q: What strong characteristics do women bring to agriculture?
A: The same characteristics as men. Women are intelligent, strong, determined and very capable of taking on any role in the agriculture industry.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your personal life?
A: I grew up on a grain and beef cattle farm in southwest Saskatchewan. I always enjoyed helping out on the farm, especially with the cattle. I was also a member of our local 4-H beef club for many years, and agriculture played a huge role in my upbringing. I am married to my husband, Chad. We have a one-year-old daughter named Taylor, and live on a farm near Abbey, Sask., where we have 90 beef cows and a bit of farm land.

Q: How are you able to juggle your career with your personal life?
A: I live 90 kilometres from my office, and by the time I drop my daughter off at daycare, it takes me about an hour and 15 minutes to get to work every morning and the same going home in the evening. This makes for a long work day. Since returning to work after my maternity leave, I have been working 80 per cent at full time. This has helped with my work-life balance. During busy times, such as calving, seeding and harvest, the farm can take up a lot of free time. I find if you enjoy doing farm tasks, it seems less like work. I have a great support system with my parents, sister and good friends close by to help with childcare if needed. It is difficult to juggle work and play, but it is important to take some down time to relax and do things with friends and family.

Q: What advice do you have for other women looking at a career in agriculture?
A: There is a place for everyone in agriculture. It is an amazing, interesting and diverse industry to work in. If you are knowledgeable in your field and good at what you do, you will have a very rewarding career in agriculture.
Q: Can you outline your educational/professional background?
A: I’m a professor of animal physiology in the faculty of agriculture at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. I started as an assistant professor in 1994, and have been here ever since, with the exception of a two-year term as the academic vice-president and provost at St. Francis Xavier University. I have a PhD in reproductive physiology from the University of California, Davis, a master of science in animal breeding and genetics from the University of Alberta, and a bachelor of science in agriculture from the University of Guelph (U of G). After I finished my PhD in 1991, I was awarded an NSERC-Industry Postdoctoral Fellowship in molecular biology at U of G, funded in part by Semex Canada.

Q: How and why did you decide to get into your field?
A: I grew up in the city but wanted to go to U of G to learn more about animals. I was initially interested in veterinary medicine since that was the only profession that I knew involved animals. At Guelph, I was exposed to agriculture and worked on a dairy farm for a summer. When I reached my third year, I was lucky to find jobs in research and became convinced animal agricultural research was for me. That meant going to graduate school, which provided a fantastic opportunity to live in new places and soak up culture and ideas from all over the world.

Q: Can you outline some of your accomplishments/projects you’re proud of?
A: My most rewarding moments as a professor are when I hear good things about or from my students long after they graduate. I’ve also been vice-president and co-president, and those senior administrative roles have much broader impacts. One example is the bachelor of agriculture in international food business—a collaborative dual degree from Dalhousie and Aeres University of Applied Science in the Netherlands that we started in 2011. More recently, I’ve been part of a group of professors initiating a certificate in animal welfare, which we are building as an online course to promote a science-based approach to evaluating welfare, particularly in farm animals.

Q: Are there many other women who work in this field?
A: Yes, the number of female professors in animal agriculture has increased faster than in other agricultural fields, and our department professoriate is now half female, perhaps because the student base also has a higher than average proportion of females.

Q: What challenges do you encounter working in the agricultural field?
A: In the early days, it was challenging to be recognized as a legitimate voice for agricultural issues in part because I didn’t speak up enough. You can feel so exposed in a room where you’re the only woman. As more women appeared in all settings that involve agricultural decision-making, it became easier. I’ve learned two important things. We must speak up. Most men and women just want to get the best ideas out and the work done. Secondly, there is a long line of research showing when female ideas are expressed in mixed gender settings, those ideas are often attributed to a male. The term for it is “bro-propriated.” It is important to consider how you want to follow up on your points if bro-propriation is happening. There are strategies for improving your impact and that of other women at the table while not denigrating your male colleagues.

Q: Are you involved in any women in agriculture associations?
A: Although this isn’t specific to agriculture, I am on the executive of a national networking and professional development organization for women academic administrators. I’m also a long-term member of a professional agrology association in Nova Scotia, which is a good support system for both women and men. There are also Advancing Women in Agriculture conferences, including one coming up in Niagara in October. One of my research project students was sponsored by Genome Alberta and another was sponsored by John Deere to attend one of these conferences. Both students found it to be a valuable experience and both are future leaders in agriculture.

Q: What strong characteristics do women bring to agriculture?
A: Women bring the same qualities men bring—intellect, analysis, thoughtfulness,
ideas, an understanding of the world, business sense, innovation, resourcefulness, connections, sense of stewardship and responsibility—but usually, with a different cultural and societal experience to frame those contributions and often different ways of expressing them than men.

Q: Can you outline your educational/professional background?
A: I’m currently a partner at MNP where I’m responsible for managing client relationships with more than 80 dairy producers, as well as a team of staff members. I started with MNP in 2004 after completing my bachelor of commerce degree from the University of Calgary. While with MNP, I completed my certified public accountant and chartered accountant designation in 2007.

Q: How and why did you decide to get into your field?
A: The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Alberta hosted a few information sessions at the University of Calgary. The variety of work in this area was appealing to me.

Q: Can you outline some of your accomplishments/projects you’re proud of?
A: Some of my accomplishments include being welcomed into the MNP partnership in 2011, receiving the early achievement award from the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Alberta in 2012, and being appointed to the Agricultural Products Marketing Council in Alberta in 2012.

Q: Are there many other women who work in this field?
A: Yes, I am fortunate there are quite a few women in the office and at MNP. I find there are more women entering the accounting profession.

Q: What challenges do you encounter working in the agricultural field?
A: I have been very fortunate I get to work with great people. I have learned it is important to find good mentors who can help you navigate your career and be a sounding board for when you encounter challenges.

Q: Are you involved in any women in agriculture associations?
A: I have been involved in a women’s networking group in Red Deer, Alta., which was a great place to make connections with other professional women.

Q: What strong characteristics do women bring to agriculture?
A: Communication skills and a different perspective.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your personal life?
A: I grew up mostly living in a basement apartment in Ottawa, but was able to spend the summers about a half hour away on the edge of a beautiful farming area. Working on a dairy farm for a summer transformed me. I found out at the end of the summer the farmer hired me with the expectation I would quit in a couple of days. Instead, I was fortunate enough to build a friendship with that family that’s lasted almost 40 years. Now, I’m married with two grown kids. We had a sheep flock for several years, but are now back in town with only two dogs for livestock. Unfortunately, neither of my children look destined for agriculture, although my son spends time at his girlfriend’s family farm in rural Alberta, so maybe there’s hope.

Q: How are you able to juggle your career with your personal life?
A: My husband has a technical job with fixed hours, so he is a real partner in making sure the kids are looked after and we have food in the house. When work gets crazy on a protracted basis, I remind myself the people in my family are the most important thing, and plan to put them at the top of my list. An hour with people you care about is not as much fun as a day, but it makes a big difference to you and them. The bonus is it likely increases your own productivity.

Q: What advice do you have for other women looking at a career in agriculture?
A: Do it. There are no careers more meaningful, and you can pick an aspect of agriculture that suits you. It could be producing food, marketing, processing, customer relations, research, teaching, advising, selling or developing agriculture supplies or products. All are important.