

The FFA Girl: A Historical Examination of the Driving Forces Leading to Girls' Admittance into the National FFA Organization

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Abstract

This historical study examined the admission of girls into the National FFA Organization and documented its impact on the organization. Further, the study illuminated the cultural and societal forces that led to girls becoming members of FFA in 1969 and the influence this decision had on agricultural education and the organization more broadly. As a result, we found that girls were active participants in agricultural education and state-level FFA organizations prior to 1969; however, gender bias and organizational resistance delayed their official recognition. Advocacy from progressive educators such as Rufus Stimson and social pressure from women's rights movements and the broader civil rights legislation of the 1960s, ultimately, led to the FFA admitting females. Since their official recognition as members, females have taken on more significant roles at all levels of the organization. As a consequence, this study highlighted the need for ongoing research into gender equity within FFA. We also call for the National FFA Organization to more fully acknowledge the historical struggle for the inclusion of females in the organization by creating teaching resources to facilitate student learning on the cultural, political, and social factors that shaped girls' admittance into the organization. Finally, this research provided a foundation for future studies to explore strategies for supporting women and advancing equity in agricultural education.

Introduction and Review of Literature

Women have fought for equal rights for generations, and up until 1920, did not even have the constitutional right to vote in elections (United States Constitution, 1919). In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified and declared that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex" (United States Constitution, 1919, H. J. Res. 1). Thereafter, women could make their own political decisions and have a voice in national and local leadership. The 19th Amendment, however, did not erase bias and discrimination in the United States workplace.

Women have struggled to obtain employment and work comparable hours for similar pay to their male counterparts (Yellen, 2020). Most of the milestones achieved in women's rights have resulted from

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the work of activists through the Women's Rights Movement, who championed issues such as access to employment, equal pay, and other relevant issues (Bunch, 1990). The Civil Rights Act (1964), eventually signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, granted women equal opportunity in the workplace in the United States. Although *glass ceilings* were still a significant issue, this legislation was a landmark victory because it made discrimination in the workplace illegal based on "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin" (The Civil Rights Act, 1964, Section 703). The historical record points to two concurrent movements in the 1960s – *civil* and *women's* rights - that coalesced to make progress in the fight against the discrimination of women (Bunch, 1990, 2012). Despite this, the National FFA Organization (FFA) took five additional years after the adoption of the Civil Rights Act to admit girls into its membership.

A study by Kanter (the Ohio FFA Executive Secretary) and Bender (1966), revealed insight into why girls might have been delayed admission to the organization. For example, state leadership participated in the study and were asked to rate their agreement on the following item using a five-point Likert-type scale: "[should FFA] allow girls who are enrolled in vocational agriculture full membership in the FFA?" (Kanter & Bender, 1966, p. 17). The respondents who were least in favor of girls being admitted were state FFA executive secretaries and state agricultural teacher presidents. On the contrary, teacher educators were the most agreeable. As such, an important implication from the study was that individuals who held more political power in FFA deemed girls' membership undesirable (Kanter & Bender, 1966). Perhaps the resistance of leaders in agricultural education regarding this issue was one reason why it took several more years before girls were finally granted formal membership in the organization. Despite Kanter's (1966) assertion that "girl membership be considered... [because] the Vocational Act of 1963 indicated [that] all students should be served" (p. 37).

The admission of girls in 1969 was also likely due to the direct or indirect pressure on educational officials to end sex-based discrimination. For example, in the lead-up to passage of Title IX legislation in 1972, a groundswell of support emerged for women's rights legislation. Title IX of 1972 prohibited discrimination based on sex in educational programs and activities in the United States.

Although girls were welcomed to join as members more than 50 years ago, the struggle for equal representation continued. For example, Bowen (2002) argued that "we have extreme difficulty discussing this topic (ethnic and gender diversity) with meaningful dialogue..." (p. 1). Historically, women have also struggled to be fully accepted as teachers of agriculture, as evidenced by the admission that if a female were to teach, she should teach in a multi-teacher department and be responsible for horticulture-related courses (Bradley, 1971). To illuminate this issue, Kelsey (2006) studied women's experiences in preservice agricultural education programs in Oklahoma. The findings revealed that recent graduates planned on moving out of state "due to the provincial attitudes experienced during early field experiences" (Kelsey, 2006, p. 127). Such findings suggested that gender bias remained an issue in agricultural education in recent decades and, perhaps, in the FFA, as well. Therefore, a need existed to examine the forces that opened the door for women to join FFA and tell the story of individuals responsible for championing this cause (Moore, 2019, 2020).

Theoretical Perspective

When conducting this investigation, we used the feminist theoretical perspective to ground our interpretation of historical artifacts regarding how girls' membership came to be in the FFA (Crotty, 1998). The feminist lens can help critique gendered biases and draw implications that seek to initiate social change and improve the experiences of girls and women (Bailey, 2012). For example, although traditional research approaches seek to generalize knowledge, feminist researchers invoke change by calling into question gendered norms and traditions that preserve systems of power and oppression (Bailey, 2012). To accomplish such, Fonow and Cook (2005) advocated for five principles that feminists should uphold: (1) openness to

critique, (2) a rejection of the view that objectivity can exist in research, (3) awareness that gender has influenced beliefs and thoughts in society, (4) ethical and equitable practices, and (5) a desire to positively change norms that limit women's opportunities.

We embedded these principles throughout our historical inquiry. It should be noted that the use of a feminist lens requires researchers to employ a critical examination *of* and reflection *on* how women have been marginalized by organizations and in the larger society (Crotty, 1998). Further, feminists should seek to understand how the "invisibility of women has permeated the everyday commonsense notions of leadership" (Smyth, 1989, p. 66). In this investigation, we sought to illuminate how girls' participation in FFA was hindered over multiple decades before they were allowed to become members and ascend to leadership roles. In addition, we sought to highlight the efforts of women in agricultural education leading up to and after the admittance of girls as FFA members.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study aimed to describe how girls were granted membership in the FFA and document the impact they have had on the organization. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What were the driving forces that led to the admittance of girls into FFA at the 42nd National FFA Convention? and (2) What impact have girls had on agricultural education before and after their admittance into the National FFA Organization?

The purpose of this study was to narrate how girls were granted membership in FFA in 1969 and document the impact they have had on the organization. For more than 50 years, girls have made considerable contributions and held leadership positions from local to national levels (Moore, 2019, 2020). However, the fight for female membership was clouded by considerable adversity and did not occur until 30 years after the initial conversations began negotiating such. As a consequence, the intent of this investigation was to ignite a critical conversation on the lessons learned from this historical event and suggest implications to better address issues of diversity and inclusion for the National FFA Organization and its stakeholders moving forward. Further, this study aimed to highlight the efforts in which girls had engaged through agricultural education before and after the admittance to the National FFA Organization.

Methods and Procedures

The historical approach was most appropriate for this investigation (Salevouris & Furay, 2015). Historical research aims to provide detailed accounts of how ideological, social, legal, and systematic issues impact discourse and change on an issue. When using this approach, contextually situated sources can aid in telling the story of a historical event (Salevouris & Furay, 2015). The historical narrative drew from a combination of primary and secondary sources, including artifacts, documents, interviews, legislative policies, and other relics from the past such as photographs and magazine captions (Enns & Martin, 2015). Together, these sources helped reconstruct the actions and actors that led to the removal of the word *male* from Article IV of the National FFA Constitution at the 42nd National FFA Convention.

Primary sources included direct quotes from historical figures, proceedings from National FFA Conventions, correspondence with FFA officials, the *National FFA Manual*, *FFA New Horizons* articles, and official letter correspondences. Secondary resources included online resources and journal articles from scholarly works. All resources were vetted against the study's objectives to ensure relevance, accuracy, and precision (Salvorious & Furay, 2015). Each data source was also subjected to internal and external criticisms (McDowell, 2002). For instance, we externally criticized each document by analyzing it to authenticate its authorship. The internal criticism process allowed us to assess the documents and

determine whether each source was relevant to the purpose of this investigation. Sources that did not meet this aim were deemed irrelevant; therefore, they were not used in this investigation (McDowell, 2002).

Data analysis included the discernment of quality resources and cross-examining those primary resources with one another to ensure accuracy and corroboration. Using this approach, data analysis and synthesis occurred simultaneously (McDowell, 2002). After carefully analyzing each source, we compared such to the research questions to establish its credibility and relevance. Triangulation of our resources provided a fuller explanation of the richness and complexity of human behaviors steering the phenomenon by studying it from more than one viewpoint (Cohen & Manion, 2017). Ultimately, the sources were organized in their order of occurrence to identify and illuminate the driving forces of girls' admittance into FFA.

Findings

Research Question 1: What were the driving forces that led to the admittance of girls into FFA at the 42nd National FFA Convention?

The FFA has impacted millions of students across the United States since its beginning in 1928. The National FFA Organization (2025) recently surpassed 1 million members for the first time. FFA was originally intended to be for farm boys, with a mission to “prepare future generations for the challenges of feeding a growing population” (National FFA Organization, 2022a, para. 6). It should be noted, however, that the National FFA Constitution did not initially read that only boys could join the organization. Rather, Article 1, Section B, Item 4 read: “students in vocational agriculture” (Future Farmers of America, 1929, p. 30). In fact, in its manual, the Future Farmers of America (1929) explained that “any student of vocational agriculture, who is enrolled in a part-time, day-unit or all-day class is entitled to active membership” (p. 31). In the minutes from the first National FFA Convention, held on November 20, 1928, acting adviser, C. H. Lane predicted: “...for a long time, and probably permanently, there will be quite wide variations in the organization” (Future Farmers of America, 1928, p. 5). Such wide variations would not come, though, without extreme efforts from activists, signage of policies and legislation, and the lapse of a great deal of time.

No ambiguity existed in the original constitution; instead, the distinction of *boys-only* membership was ratified as an amendment in 1930 (National FFA Board of Trustees, 1930). Rufus Stimson, supervisor of agricultural education in Massachusetts, advocated for all people, regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity, to have equal access to the Massachusetts FFA Association (Stimson, 1931a). When Massachusetts originally applied for a State FFA Charter in 1929, it was noted that Massachusetts would allow girls to join FFA at the local and state level and such was accepted by National FFA Adviser C. H. Lane as long as they did not participate at the regional or national levels. A few years later, Dr. Lane took a firmer opposition to girls' membership in the organization by stating: “there is only one line drawn in the FFA organization, and that is, it is a boy and man organization” (Lane, 1931a, para. 1).

Once this issue was brought to Stimson's attention through official correspondence with Lane, he proposed that Massachusetts amend its constitution to read “... only male members shall be proposed for office, honors, or participation in contests, controlled by the National Association of Future Farmers of America” (Stimson, 1931b, para. 3). After criticism from the Massachusetts FFA Association, Lane softened his position and recommended an amendment to the National FFA Constitution to ensure that male membership did not interfere with state affairs, so long as *only* boys were permitted access to FFA privileges at the national level (Lane, 1931b). As a result of the passage of this amendment, state and local programs could allow girls to be involved; however, they were not permitted to partake in national events. In the early 1900s, men were expected to be the breadwinners and work outside the home, either on farms or in industry.

In the era when FFA was becoming established, men were participating in fraternal organizations that reinforced traditional ideas of masculinity (Waterman et al., 2020).

Despite these changes, the issue of girls' participation in FFA continued to spark heated discussion and actions. For example, in 1933, the Essex FFA Chapter in Massachusetts qualified for a National FFA Contest. However, because girl names appeared on the chapter's roster, their participation at the national event would have violated the National FFA Constitution. Stimson promptly wrote a letter to W. A. Ross, the National FFA Executive Secretary, where he acknowledged the violation and offered a solution of erasing the "names of two or three girls which appear on some of the sheets" (Stimson, 1933, para. 4). Stimson's proposal led to contentious debate among FFA members and adult leaders across the country because it would still allow girls to participate in a national level event. As an illustration, Vernon Howell (1933), the National FFA President from 1932-1933, threatened Stimson: "... [that] no girl, [sic] student in vocational agriculture will be allowed active membership in the Future Farmers of America... and unless Massachusetts complies... drastic action by the National Board of Trustees will be necessary" (para. 4).

It was further decided on the 1933 National FFA Convention's delegate floor that Massachusetts would be suspended from affiliation with the FFA should they not comply within three months (Weaver, 1933). Further, Lester Pollom (1933), the Kansas Supervisor of Vocational Agriculture, agreed that the boys at the convention made the right call by threatening Stimson and the Massachusetts FFA Association because "thousands of Future Farmer boys would lose their respect for the organization if girls are admitted" (para. 3). Stimson worked tirelessly to keep the peace with national FFA officials. Nevertheless, his colleagues considered disassociating with him because of his position to allow girls to become FFA members.

Arthur Getman (1933), member of the National FFA Board of Trustees, reported that a constitutional change to admit girls into the organization had been proposed and further explained the Massachusetts situation to the delegates during the 1933 National FFA Convention. However, the FFA Board of Trustees and the delegates at the National FFA Convention struggled to understand "the desirability of females as members of the FFA... and the right of any state to determine upon its own procedure" (Getman, 1933, para. 4). Despite hurdles, Massachusetts proved to be the pioneer in leading the discussion on girls' membership in FFA. W. J. Weaver, State Vocational Agriculture Supervisor of New York, explained: "Probably the chief item that was discussed at the time was the matter that is up at the present time concerning the status of the Massachusetts organization in connection with girls in its membership" (Weaver, 1935, para. 2).

In 1935, Massachusetts delegate Alfred Vaughan discussed inviting women to join FFA membership during a business session at the National FFA Convention. As a result, J. A. Linke, who served on the National FFA Board of Trustees, was appointed to explore female involvement in FFA in Massachusetts (Future Farmers of America, 1935). After his investigation, he recommended that "our interest in the boys of Massachusetts should be the guide in whatever action the convention would take" (Future Farmers of America, 1935, p. 12). On October 24, 1935, the first order of business of the National FFA Convention was to reconsider female membership in FFA. Voting delegates, Davis of Montana and Hebert of Louisiana, moved and seconded that the discussion be had behind closed doors (Future Farmers of America, 1935). Records indicated that not only was the discussion not entertained, but Vaughan's request was deeply opposed, and delegates even voted to fight against female membership with the following constitutional amendment:

When officially found that any State Association in a Future Farmers of America has girl members on its rolls, such State Associations shall be denied participation in all national Future Farmer of America contests and national F.F.A. awards. And no funds from the national treasury shall be

available to such State Associations for the purpose of transporting delegates to the national conventions until such time as the names of the girl members are removed from the official rolls (rosters) of the State Association and local chapters in accordance with the constitution. (Future Farmers of America, 1935, p. 14)

Little conversation was documented after passage of that constitutional amendment until 1964 at the 37th National FFA Convention. Delegates from Connecticut and Puerto Rico made a motion, and it was seconded, that female membership be considered (Future Farmers of America, 1964). The minutes recorded that a discussion was held, but the motion ultimately failed (Future Farmers of America, 1964). Ironically, one of the guest speakers at the same convention was A. D. Pinson, the New Farmers of America President (Future Farmers of America, 1964). The New Farmers of America (NFA) was an organization that largely paralleled the FFA in values, goals, and tradition. Aside from minor differences, the primary distinction between the two agricultural organizations was that the NFA was for only Black male students, while the FFA was for White male students. The FFA absorbed the NFA the next year in 1965, mainly due to public school desegregation laws (Riebel, 2022; Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). The merger essentially adopted all FFA traditions including the FFA Creed, Official Dress Standards, emblem, and leadership roles. Additionally, NFA assets were transferred to FFA and African American teachers were forced to teach FFA standards, leaving out the history of the NFA entirely (Wakefield & Talbert, 2003).

The call for equitable treatment of girls enrolled in agricultural education courses finally became a reality on October 15, 1969, when Paul Blankhead of California moved, and Robert Craig of Michigan seconded, to strike the word male from the National FFA Constitution (Future Farmers of America, 1969). The attempts initiated by Rufus Stimson nearly 40 years prior and after multiple conversations by leaders across the nation, the motion finally carried. In the morning session on October 17, 1969, Johnny Holland from Tennessee stood before the delegate body and declared the following resolution, which ultimately passed by a two-vote margin:

Whereas, we, the delegates, to the [42nd] Annual Convention have voted to allow all student[s] of vocational agriculture to become members of the FFA; Whereas, we therefore have expressed our belief that all individuals are created equal and should have equal opportunities. Whereas, we also feel that only those who have competed on an equal basis and earned national recognition should be highly honored at our national convention; be it therefore...resolved, that we, the delegates, gathered here today, feel that the introduction of the first active female members to participate in the national FFA activities and the atmosphere and publicity thus associated with these events, be recognized as over-dramatized presentations and should not be taken as precedence set for following female participation, that instead FFA members, girls and boys, should be treated and honored equally. (Future Farmers of America, 1969, p. 25)

Almost two decades later, in 1988, the organization officially changed its name from FFA to the National FFA Organization to reflect the ever-growing scope of the agricultural industry (National FFA Organization, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Students from traditional and non-traditional backgrounds were encouraged to find their place in FFA, as the name change's purpose was to "reflect the growing diversity and new opportunities in the industry of agriculture" (National FFA Organization, 2022a, para. 1). As a result of such changes, members of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and genders were officially welcomed into the FFA.

Research Question #2: What Impact have Girls had on Agricultural Education Before and After their Admittance into the National FFA Organization?

Long before girls were finally granted membership in FFA, women paved the way to equal opportunity through social movements and legislation. The first feminist movement in the U.S. was from 1860-1920's and led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony (United States National Archives, 2021). Their primary goals were to impact policymakers for women's suffrage and the right to vote (United States National Archives, 2021). Women were ultimately granted the right to vote in 1920 with adoption of the 19th Amendment. During this time, women in agriculture were also activating to expand their rights. One pioneer who championed such a cause was Charlotte Barrell Ware of Massachusetts, who organized, directed, and supported Warelands Dairy School from 1909 to 1913. This school trained women for dairying and aimed to protect the public, especially children, against disease-ridden milk products. Ware was also a "...promoter of school and home gardening... [and was] unstinting in her public service to education for superior farming careers" (Stimson, n.d., p. 1).

During World War I, men left their homes to pursue higher wages in the defense industry and women were left to tend to the fields and learn how to work the land. The Women's Land Army of America (WLAA) was created out of a need for women to learn agricultural practices while their husbands were away. The Women's Agricultural Camp was offered by Barnard College in Bedford, New York, during 1917. In its inaugural year, 142 women attended the camp over a four-month period. The camp "provided lectures, training, and hands-on experience on local farms" (Spring, 2017, para. 3). By 1918, more than 15,000 women were recruited to the WLAA. Women were often termed *farmerettes* as they worked eight-hour days and demanded equal wages to their male counterparts. The WLAA provided educational opportunities for women and was funded by women. The WLAA was a privately funded entity and, shortly after World War I ended, was forced to disband due to insufficient funding.

Elsie Marie Hill provided a glimpse of how much girls could offer the FFA and agricultural education. Although she was never granted membership in FFA, she was the first recorded woman agricultural education teacher (Breen, 1962). She served at Flintstone High School, the first vocational agriculture high school in Maryland, from 1918 to 1926 and then served as principal for the remainder of her career (Moore, 2020). Hill often used her initials, i.e., E. M. Hill, as a penname to sign documents because men were primarily agricultural teachers and/or administrators of schools (Moore, 2020). Hill initiated her own version of the FFA, called her *Wide-Awake Gang* (Breen, 1962, p. 11). She conducted home visits twice per summer to monitor and advise students' agricultural projects, as it was required for all agricultural educators to "provide for directed or supervised practice in agriculture, either on a farm or provided for by the school" (Smith Hughes Vocational Education Act, 1917, Section 10).

Dora Winchester was among the first girls admitted to the Massachusetts FFA Association. However, she never gained National FFA Membership because it violated the National FFA Constitution (Allen, 1936). As a student on scholarship at Essex County Agricultural School, she graduated in 1934 as one of only three girls in a class of 40 students (Essex County Agricultural School, 1936). Winchester earned the accolade of "best secretary we have ever had in the state association," according to the state adviser, Rufus Stimson (Essex County Agricultural School, 1936, para. 2). Despite her breadth of knowledge and passion for agriculture, she was one of the reasons for the dispute that nearly cost Massachusetts its National FFA Charter. Because of the efforts of Mr. Stimson, Dora and other girls in Massachusetts were provided the opportunities of their male counterparts at the local and state levels. She proved that "girl students are entitled to everything vocational education has to offer" (Essex County Agricultural School, para. 4).

Girls did have some formal recognition in FFA prior to membership as *FFA Sweethearts*. The FFA Sweetheart was largely a combination of beauty, personality, talent, and popularity contests. Each chapter selected the sweetheart differently, but most were voted on by the boys in FFA (Moore, 2018). Levels of the competition went past the chapter level to area, state, and tri-state sweetheart beauty contests. Sweethearts were awarded the coveted white-corduroy jacket that looked similar to the boys FFA jacket. A sister organization to FFA at the time was the Future Homemakers of America (FHA), which was an organization for girls in high school. The FHA also selected a beau, and the organizations worked closely together. The FFA Sweetheart and FHA Beau were often public figures and advocates for the programs. It helped “dispel the idea that vo-ag boys are without polish or social acumen,” according to Cardozier (1958, pp. 131-132). The first girl on record to be named FFA Sweetheart was Jo Murphree from Rockdale High School in Texas during 1935 (Moore, 2018). FFA sweethearts started to fade after girls’ admittance into FFA, but some chapters still elect sweethearts.

In light of World War II, Eleanor Roosevelt, who was the assistant director of volunteer services for the Office of Civilian Defense, announced her support for rekindling the Women’s Land Army of America in 1941. However, Secretary of Agriculture Wickard was “reluctant to support a Women’s Land Army” (Litoff & Smith, 1993, para. 15) despite their proven success and aid during World War I. Even though Secretary Wickard said himself that “we must find some way, in the not-too-distant future, to deal with a shortage of food. Food is just as much a weapon in this war as guns... I hope we come to this realization in time” (Litoff & Smith, 1993, para. 15). Despite his acknowledgement of needing a solution for the food shortage, he was lukewarm to the idea when President Roosevelt “prodded the secretary to consider the use of women and children during the farm emergency” (Litoff & Smith, 1993, para. 1). The Rokahr Committee was formed by Mary A. Rokahr to address the need for training women and satisfy the labor shortages (Spring, 2017). Finally, after receiving some pressure from President Roosevelt and the Rokahr committee, Secretary Wickard voiced his approval. Florence Hall was appointed head of the Women’s Land Army on April 12, 1943, and under her administration, nearly 3 million non-farm women joined the effort. Under her leadership, the WLAA was granted federal funding to sponsor women taking agricultural science training (Litoff & Smith, 1993).

Another woman who demonstrated the value of women in agriculture and FFA was Dorothy Gilson. Less than 20 years after FFA was founded, Dorothy Gilson demonstrated that women had a place and could add value to agriculture and FFA (Flatt, 2019). Out of fear that she would not be accepted because of her gender, Dorothy did not use her full name for state and national rosters and competitions in 1942. Instead, she used the name D. Gilson to mask her identity (Flatt, 2019). Although her efforts have not been well-documented in the National FFA Archives, she has been credited with being very engaged as an agricultural education student, led successful projects on the family farm, and received her chapter’s coveted Carpentry Award as a senior (Flatt, 2019, para. 2). West Chester University, her alma mater, has celebrated the ways in which she *bucked the system* in FFA by awarding scholarships in her name to students who “self-identify transgender and have advocated in the community for the inclusion of gender identity in policies and practices” (Baker Family Scholarship, 2022, para. 8). Her legacy continues to impact individuals yearly through her actions.

Building on the foundation laid by trailblazers like Gilson, Mary Jane Zipse made her debut in *The National Future Farmer Magazine*. Zipse was the first female farmer spotlighted in the official magazine produced by FFA. Spotlighted in 1959, she was from Mount Morris, Illinois, and grew up in production agriculture. Her advisor recalled: “She could have been an American Star Farmer herself if girls were eligible” (The National Future Farmer, 1959, p. 30). He went on to say that “she was a vo-ag student under me. Good one, too! She completed all the shop work, welding assignments, and paperwork the boys were required to do... Mary was the outstanding agriculture student during her senior year” (The National Future Farmer, 1959, p. 30).

Anita Decker Wright was another pioneer in FFA, as the first of two girls to serve as National FFA Voting Delegates in 1970. After her experience, she made it clear that females were involved in FFA, although not recognized at the national level, far before 1969: “I didn’t realize what a big deal it was... because girls had been involved at the local and district levels” (as cited by Helmer, 2019, para. 3). At the time, FFA chapters would be penalized for including girls on their state membership rosters and could even be suspended or disassociated with the National FFA Organization (Weaver, 1933). As the fight for inclusion continued, the visibility of women in FFA began to grow more publicly, culminating in national recognition of their accomplishments and leadership.

Debbie Nelson of Minnesota was credited as the first girl FFA member on the cover of *The National Future Farmer Magazine* in 1972. Her family had a farm, and she owned three of the 16 horses on the farm. Debbie “won the overall horsemanship and showmanship honor in the first Minnesota FFA Horse Show held at the state fair” (*The National Future Farmer*, 1972, p. 26). She used her earnings from selling a horse to attend the Minnesota FFA People-to-People tour to Europe. Debbie also participated in an FFA study abroad program in Germany to develop her veterinary skills before attending the University of Minnesota at St. Paul to become a veterinarian. Her work in the equine industry was highlighted in 1972. She was active in FFA, participating in livestock, land, meats, horse, and wool judging, in which she earned high point individual in the state. Debbie also extended education to children in first to sixth grades through horse clinics (*The National Future Farmer*, 1972). She showed students how to determine the age of horses and taught ownership as well as showmanship.

Only five years after the admittance of girls into FFA, Cathie Malison was the first female to run for National FFA Office in 1974. Although she was not elected, she was among the first girls to earn the American FFA Degree – the highest degree a member could earn. Julie Smiley from Washington became the first female to serve as a National FFA Officer when she was elected Western Region Vice President in 1976 (Flatt, 2019). And six years later, Jan Eberly from California was elected National FFA President in 1982 (Flatt, 2019). Since then, more than 80 girls have served as National FFA Officers (Hulshof, 2022). Throughout the existence of FFA, many girls made strides and broke barriers along the way. Among those were Karlene Lindow Krueger, who in 2002 became the first female named the *American Star Farmer* for the organization. Over 30 years after the admittance of girls into the organization, Krueger proved that she was worthy of the honor, and her jacket was one of five that were selected to hang in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History (Fite, 2014).

More recently, gender and racial inequities were addressed with the election of Breanna Holbert as the first African American female to serve as National FFA President in 2017. As she recounted her year of service, Holbert noted that it made her realize “that other African American girls are going to follow in my footsteps, and I feel so proud of that” (as cited in Helmer, 2019, para. 15). Breanna identified her biggest hardship in FFA:

When I became a national officer, unique to my teammates, I was like the first female African American National Officer. And that was probably the hardest thing I’ve ever gone through in FFA. Not that I wasn’t proud to be that because I still am, and I teach multicultural students, so when they see that they think, ‘oh my gosh, I can do this too!’ But like sometimes as a woman of color in the organization, with people that didn’t really understand experiences, often I would have to [or] I felt like I had to share the story of almost all multicultural kids, and I didn’t grow up like every single multicultural kid. So, it kind of made it hard to go around the country and some folks would say things that weren’t the most appropriate... So, I think that was probably the hardest thing about being [in this role] was having to step up for FFA’s systemic challenges that they haven’t addressed yet... (B. Holbert, personal communication, March 26, 2024)

As Breanna alluded, systemic challenges still remained in 2019, even after years of girl leaders, advocates, and teachers (Helmer, 2019). Women were agricultural teachers, administrators, chapter and state FFA members, and leaders long before their admission to National FFA Rosters in 1969. Since then, female members continued to prove their capabilities to serve as leaders in the organization despite gender and racial inequalities. Table 1 provides an overview of the accomplishments of females in agricultural education and FFA before and after their admittance into the National FFA Organization.

Table 1

Accomplishments of Females in Agriculture and FFA Before and After Their Admittance into the National FFA Organization

Prominent Females	Impacts on Agriculture/FFA	Years
Charolette Ware	Started Warelands Dairy School (women's training center for dairy farmers)	1909-1913
Elsie Marie Hill	1st female agricultural educator	1918
Dora Winchester	One of the first female FFA members in Massachusetts; Graduated from an agricultural school	1934
Jo Murphree	1st documented FFA Sweetheart	1935
Dorothy Gilson	Agricultural education student in Pennsylvania; awarded senior carpenter award by her chapter	1942
Florence Hall	Head of Women's Land Army (World War II)	1943
Mary Jane Zipse	1 st female farmer spotlighted in <i>The National Future Farmer Magazine</i> (on the cover)	1959
Esther Peterson	Labor activists for equal pay regarding females	1960s
Anita Decker Wright	1 st of two female FFA members to serve as a voting delegate	1970
Cathie Malison	1st girl to run for National FFA Officer/ among the first to earn the American FFA Degree	1974
Julie Smiley	1st female National FFA Officer	1976
Jan Eberly	1st female National FFA President	1982
Karlene Lindow Krueger	1st female named American Star Farmer	2002
Debbie Nelson	1st girl FFA member on the cover of <i>The National Future Farmer Magazine</i>	1972
Breanna Holbert	1st female African American elected National FFA President	2017

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

In recent years, the National FFA Organization (2022a) has prided itself on being accessible to students of all backgrounds and abilities. However, access to membership for girls came much later than many believed was fair, due in large part to persistent gender bias within agricultural education and youth leadership programs (Bailey, 2012; Fonow & Cook, 2005). During the organization's formative decades, several earlier leaders in agricultural education openly opposed the inclusion of girls in FFA (Howell, 1933; Lane, 1931a, 1931b; Pollom, 1933; Weaver, 1933). Even so, there were advocates who challenged these exclusionary norms and fought for girls to gain the same rights and privileges as their boy peers. One of the most prominent voices for inclusion was Rufus Stimson (1931a, 1931b, 1933), who faced criticism and even threats to the Massachusetts FFA Association's standing within the national organization because of his advocacy (Howell, 1933; Pollom, 1933). It ultimately took the broader momentum of the women's

rights movement and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to compel FFA to extend membership to girls at the national level (Moore, 2019).

Our feminist critique of the historical record revealed that FFA's exclusion of girls mirrored the broader patriarchal structures of early to mid-20th Century American society, where leadership, production agriculture, and public life were framed as male domains, while women were relegated to supportive or domestic roles. Agricultural education programs often reflected and reinforced these gendered divisions of labor, privileging *masculine* skills like mechanics and livestock production while marginalizing areas perceived to be more feminine, such as home economics or horticulture (Bailey, 2012). As a result, organizational culture in FFA became a site where traditional masculinities were cultivated and celebrated, often at the expense of inclusivity.

These cultural legacies have long-term implications. Even after formal barriers to participation were removed, implicit biases, gendered expectations, and structural inequities continued to shape the experiences of female members (Bowen, 2002; Kelsey, 2006, Enns & Martin, 2015). Recognizing how these forces shaped the experiences of girls during that time is essential for understanding not only the historical exclusion of girls but also how gendered assumptions may persist in leadership pipelines, award structures, and curriculum design today. The progress achieved is due in large part to the determination of many girls and women who labored tirelessly for equal recognition and opportunity. Their perseverance, along with the support of allies like Stimson, paved the way for lasting change. The women highlighted in this study exemplify those whose contributions helped secure full membership for girls in FFA and left a lasting positive impact on the organization.

Moving forward, research should seek to aggregate data regarding girls' impacts on FFA over time. In addition, personal witnesses and testimonies of girls involved in FFA from 1969 to the present should be documented to determine their perceptions of gender equality in the organization. This data could help determine whether such has improved in meaningful ways. We also recommend that the history and achievements of girls in FFA be celebrated more through the organization's official communication, documents, and marketing. We call for creating activities, learning resources, and professional development to teach about the historical events that led to girls' admittance into the FFA, including the advocacy of historical figures such as Rufus Stimson. Perhaps with these resources, agricultural educators can tell the story of girls' struggle for equal rights in FFA in more meaningful and impactful ways. Further, these resources could also create opportunities for teachers to create a space for discussions about gender bias so that girls and women in agricultural education feel more comfortable about sharing their experiences and seeking resources if they encounter gender inequalities in the future, including in their careers. Efforts should also be made to research the women agricultural educators and their views on how to create a more equitable profession.

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