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Landownership and power: reorienting land tenure theory

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Abstract
Historically, land tenure theory tends to present the relationships between agricultural landowners and their renter as either a dominant renter-subordinate landlord relationship where the renter holds the power in decision-making on the land, or a dominant landlord-subordinate renter relationship where the landlord maintains the power over decisions on the land. However, these relationships are much more complex and nuanced, as more recent studies have begun to emphasize. In our study, we contribute to this evolving re-orientation in land tenure theory by showing the varying ways women landowners manage their renter relationship. Using qualitative interview data from 56 women agricultural landowners in the Midwestern U.S., we add detail to the nuances that exist in the landowner-renter relationship, helping to re-orient land tenure theory by increasing the understanding of the power dynamics at play within the patriarchal structure of U.S. agriculture.

Keywords Gender · Landowner · Land tenure · Patriarchy · Power

Abbreviations

AELOS	Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey
AFT	American Farmland Trust
FSA	Farm Service Agency
NRCS	Natural Resource Conservation Service
TOTAL	Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
WFAN	Women, Food and Agricultural Network

Introduction

> "It's just a fine line to walk…. as far as me being the landlord. How much is too much?... There are certain areas where, like the year-end report, stuff like that should be forth coming from [the renters] and I have yet to receive one. Now have I pushed the point? No."
> Sandra[1]
>
> I was having problems with [my renter] communicating with me. I just couldn't get him to communicate with me and I was very troubled by that. … I actually fired my farmer.
> Nanette
>
> I have a really good relationship with all my tenants[2]… when we've had a couple of bad years in a row or something. I'll work with them because, you know, long term I'm with them to farm the land like my own. I want them to put resources back into the land… so we have a really good relationship.
> Anne

While Sandra, Nanette and Anne all have one thing in common—being agricultural landowners who rent their land to a farmer—the above quotes illustrate how the relations they have with their renter can differ quite dramatically. Historically, land tenure theory has presented these relationships in one of two ways, as either a dominant renter-subordinate landlord relationship, where the renter is the ultimate decision-maker (e.g., Constance et al. 1996; Gilbert and Beckley 1993) or a dominant landlord-subordinate renter relationship, where the landlord maintains the power

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[1] All names used throughout the manuscript are pseudonyms.

[2] While the term 'renter' is used in this study to denote farm operators, previous studies and some of the study respondents use the term 'tenant.' Both terms are used here, depending on how the cited author (or respondent) refers to farm operators.

and decision-making capabilities on the land (e.g., Mooney 1983). More recently, scholars have begun to emphasize the complexity in these relationships and push past this dualism (e.g., Carolan 2005; Carter 2017, 2019; Eells 2008; Petrzelka et al. 2018). In this paper, we contribute to this evolving re-orientation of land tenure theory, to show how the landowner-renter relationships are not as simple as an either/or situation such as early theories suggest, nor are the relationships static and unchanging. Rather, we add detail to the nuances that exist in the landowner-renter relationship, helping to re-orient land tenure theory by increasing the understanding of the power dynamics at play within the patriarchal structure of U.S. agriculture.

Understanding these relationship dynamics more fully is important for several reasons. First, 39% of the 911 million acres of U.S. farmland is being rented, and of that, 80% is owned by a nonoperating landowner (Bigelow et al. 2016), the majority of whom rent their land to a farm operator. Second, women make up 37% of the nonoperating landowner category and out of the farmland being rented, 25% is owned by a woman principal[3] nonoperating landowner (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] 2014). In addition, women nonoperating landowners rent their land at a higher rate than males (Bigelow et al. 2016). These numbers, along with recent studies suggesting the number of women landowners may actually be higher (Petrzelka et al. 2018), make it important to understand how women navigate being agricultural landowners.

Understanding and reaching women landowners is important first and foremost to highlight the critical role these women have in the agricultural system, a role which has been largely underplayed due to the patriarchal structural of American society (Sachs 1983) and underplayed in land tenure research. Second, women care about their land, and if they are aware of resources to steward it better they typically will act, but they do not receive this information through the standard (male-focused) channels, given the patriarchal system which views men as the agricultural expert (e.g., Eells 2008). Given the high rate of women landowners who rent their land, a better understanding of the relationship with the renter can help both policy makers and practitioners as they move toward a more just and sustainable agricultural system.

As Jackson-Smith and Petrzelka (2014) state, "many scholars continue to assume that landownership is an obvious source of power in social and economic relationships, but the empirical evidence from recent studies suggests that power relationships between landlords and tenants are more nuanced," (p. 64). In this paper, we delve into these nuances, based on data from qualitative interviews of women agricultural landowners in Indiana and Illinois. Our research questions are: (1) What nuances exist in the landowner-renter relationship and (2) How do these nuances help our understanding of land tenure?

We address these questions using data from interviews with women agricultural landowners in Illinois and Indiana. We begin by discussing the relevant literature on land tenure.

Literature review

The research associated with the power dynamics between landlords and renters as it relates to rented agricultural land is mixed. Power, in this context, and as we define it in this study, is operationalized as decision making and control over the use of land (Gilbert and Beckley 1993; Harvey 1982). Using this proxy of power, some research has indicated that landlords hold power in their renter relationships, stipulating barriers or creating incentives to implement certain practices on the land (e.g., Harris 1974; Mooney 1983; Ranjan et al. 2019). Other research asserts that renters maintain considerable control over land use decision-making as compared to their landlords, having the power in their landowner-renter relationships (e.g., Constance et al. 1996; Gilbert and Beckley 1993; Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011). It is the latter argument, especially as it relates to the experiences of women landowners, which has been supported more in the research.

What the majority of research has failed to address, however, (other than Leslie et al. 2019 and Carter 2017, 2019), is the influence of patriarchy within land tenure and failure to name the existing power dynamics as patriarchal.[4] Yet, the patriarchal structure is embedded within American agriculture. Patriarchal policies and norms act to prevent women from having equal influence and power over landownership as men do (Sachs 1983). Once formal property restrictions, such as laws and customs, prevented women's equal access to landownership (Effland et al. 1993). Today, those formal restrictions may no longer exist in the U.S., however, informal social norms that dictate cultural, gendered expectations remain. Gendered expectations stem from cultural narratives to determine who in society has power over the land and how it is used (Carter 2017, 2019). Cultural narratives privileging male control of land mean that women landowners are expected to be subordinate and defer power to the male renter (Carter 2017, 2019).

For example, in his Iowa study of 24 women agricultural landowners, Carolan (2005) found that women would avoid talking with renters about implementing their preferred agricultural practices to prevent scaring off renters. These landowners also described unequal power relations with their male renter. Specifically, they detailed exclusion, alienation,

[3] 'Principal' meaning the primary owner of the land.

[4] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

and deception from their male renter with regard to decision-making on their land (Carolan 2005). In more recent work, Carter (2017, 2019) gives a rich description of the complexity of situations faced by women agricultural landowners in Iowa. She identifies two ways in which women navigate to manage their land. These include acting as times as the "placeholders," exemplifying the subordinate landowner, who maintain the land as "profitable and viable so it can be passed on to the next generation." Placeholders defer their decision-making to their male renter, and thus comply with gendered norms in the patriarchal agricultural structure, despite their landownership and legal power (Carter 2017, p. 504). "Changemakers" are those women landowners who resist the gendered expectations of a "placeholder" that prioritizes men's power (Carter 2017) and who, at times, exemplify the dominant landlord. Carter (2017) finds that 19 out of the 26 women owners of Iowa farmland she interviewed expressed intentions to be a "changemaker," and they did so often through "surreptitious compromise," such as implementing a change in secret, after someone died, or at a slower pace than they might otherwise prefer (p. 514). Carter's work shows how placeholders and changemakers are statuses women occupy, and may move between, at different points in their lives. That is, the way the relationship is managed by the landowner may shift, rather than stay static over the duration of the relationship (Carter 2017).

Various intersecting demographics and renter characteristics have also been identified as impacting the landlord-renter relationship for women landowners. A quantitative study of the role of gender in on-farm decision making in four Great Lakes counties found women landowners less likely to be involved in decision-making on their land if they were older, with younger female landowners more involved in land ownership decision-making (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011). Rogers and Vandeman (1993) found similar results in their analysis of Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey (AELOS) data. This is an important finding as data from the Tenure, Ownership, and Transition of Agricultural Land survey (TOTAL[5]) found that 66% of female nonoperating principal landowners are over the age of 65 (USDA Census of Agriculture 2014), which suggests less involvement by women in decision making on their land is occurring. Ownership status is another area that may alter the power relationships among women landowners and their renters. Literature finds that some women may be more reliant on their co-owner to actively engage in decision-making for the land and communication with their farmer (e.g., Carter 2017). Additionally, the type of lease arrangement (e.g., cash rent or crop share) may factor into the landlord-renter power dynamic. Cash rent implies that the renter pays to use the land, makes all decisions, and is responsible for all risks and benefits that may incur (Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011), thus giving the renter more power, while crop share agreements typically involve shared decision-making, benefits, and risks between the renter and landowner. Rogers and Vandeman (1993) find that landlords using a cash rent agreement, regardless of gender, tend to be less involved in management decisions.

And finally, a landowner's relationship with their renter as either a family member, friend of the family, or local farmer may also factor into the power dynamics in the relationship. Women often inherit a renter along with farmland. This renter may be a neighbor, friend, or family member, who goes to church with the landowner and is part of her community. Thus, there may be tremendous social pressure to forego questions or ignore problems related to farm management, and a reluctance to express or even imply criticism of the renter (Eells and Adcock 2013). As Carter (2019, p. 895) notes, "Social control permits the continuance of historical power relations on the land even as the landowner-tenant relationship is changing." She provides an example of a woman non-operating landowner who chose not to drain a wetland on her land then faced various social sanctions, to the point where she no longer attended the church she grew up in and was ostracized by both her family and the larger community. Thus, the more recent research finds women landowners much more constrained by the social relationship with their farmer, and community pressure to conform to accepted norms. This is an important contribution to land tenure theory, for it begins to show how social constraints impact landowners differently based on their identities, and highlights the importance of the patriarchal structure in agriculture and its role in land tenure.

There are other identities that also face constraints in the world of agriculture. For example, white landowners (and farmers) own more land and generate more income than People of Color (Horst and Marion 2019). Racial and gender discrimination stemming from systemic racism is identified as a barrier for Black farmers, especially Black female farmers (Ferguson 2021; Russell et al. 2021). In addition to racism, Leslie (2019) found that heterosexism and transphobia deter some queer farmers from purchasing farmland and living in certain areas. Unfortunately, to date, most of the literature, and our research as well, focuses on white, cisgender women in heterosexual marriages. As Leslie et al. note (2019), "An important critique of much of the existing literature on gender and sexuality in agriculture is its disproportionate focus on white farmers and framing of gender relations as if they apply uniformly across races" (p. 861). While we do not address this critique in our work,

[5] TOTAL is a "comprehensive study of all rented land rented out for agricultural purposes, including both land rented out by those who are themselves farmers and ranchers (operator landlords) and land rented out by those who do not operate a farm themselves (non-operator landlords)" (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2020).

we do move the research on how social constraints impact landowners differently based on their identities forward as it relates to landowners who identify as women, and to which we now turn.

Methods

The women landowners in this study were participants of learning circles conducted by American Farmland Trust[6] (AFT 2018). In 2012, AFT began to focus on women agricultural landowners after recognizing the work of WFAN[7] and their Women Caring for the Land Program. The goal of learning circles is to educate, support, connect, and empower women agricultural landowners (and farmers) to make sustainable land management decisions (Women4theLand n.d.). The learning circle topics included conservation practices, rental agreements, rental costs, and legacy planning for the land.

The women were recruited to the learning circles in multiple ways, including using Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) lists of landowners, local newspapers, local radio stations, and Facebook to publicize the learning circles, as well as relying on word of mouth, and sharing to personal and professional social media outlets. While the women were regionally targeted based on where their land was located, the outreach at times extended beyond the regional level—for example, there were women attendees from neighboring states who have land in either Illinois or Indiana.

A comprehensive list of women participants who attended the learning circles from 2014 to 2017 was used as the study population. The women attending were asked to provide their contact information if they were willing. The list of participants included their addresses, email, and telephone contact information. Not all provided information for each of these contact modes, but a majority did provide email addresses and telephone numbers.

An initial email was sent to each woman attendee from their learning circle facilitator, where the women were informed of the purpose of the study and told that they would be contacted by the senior author via email or telephone in the upcoming weeks to schedule a telephone interview. This initial email gave the respondents the opportunity to reply directly to their learning circle facilitator to schedule an interview. For those women who did not respond to the initial email, two more email attempts were made to schedule an interview. For any emails that were returned as undeliverable, and the attendee had not provided telephone information, the contact was noted as undeliverable and eliminated from the study population list. If there were three failed attempts via email, but a telephone number was provided, then three attempts to contact the landowner were made via telephone. Any contact's number that was no longer in service was eliminated from the study population list. In instances when the participant was reached, some women were willing to be interviewed immediately, whereas in other situations, an interview was scheduled for an upcoming date and time. Prior to the interview, respondents were informed of this study's purpose and were asked for their consent to be voice recorded. If they preferred not to be recorded, detailed notes were taken. If they provided consent, then the interview was recorded and transcribed.

After removing the women on the study population list who were not landowners or who did not have accurate contact information, an N of 218 women remained. Of these, 130 were interviewed, for a final response rate of 60%. For this study, the focus is solely on the women landowners who identify as nonoperating and rent their land to a farm operator. Seventy-three of the women (56% of the total N) interviewed constitute this category. Seventeen additional respondents were eliminated because there was not enough information from their interviews to discern the power dynamics in the renter relationship, resulting in a total of 56 interviews used in this analysis. All interviews were conducted between August 2016 and October 2017.

The interviews involved both open-ended and close-ended questions. The open-ended questions focused on the landlord-renter relationship. For this research and to measure power in the landowner-renter relationship, the specific interview questions asked included: (1) Please describe your relationship with your renter; (2) Are you satisfied with this relationship and why or why not? And (3) If you could change one thing about your relationship with your renter, what would it be and why? Two coders analyzed the interview transcripts, using both inter-coder and intra-coder checking to ensure accuracy of the results. Each sentence in the transcript was first coded to determine any dominant themes. After the first round of coding, the coders shifted to a focused coding process which more precisely identified any findings relevant to the study (Emerson et al. 2011). Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved by the coders. The dominant themes relevant to the goals of this research are presented here. The close-ended questions were asked to gain information on various demographics and renter characteristics identified as related to the landlord-renter relationship (as discussed in the literature review). Descriptive statistics (tests for differences in means

[6] AFT is "an agency whose mission is to "save the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land" (American Farmland Trust 2018).

[7] WFAN "is a community of women in sustainable agriculture" with a mission to "engage women in building an ecological and just food and agricultural system through individual and community power" (Women, Food and Agriculture Network 2018).

Table 1 Categories of interview participants (N = 56)

Landowner characteristics	Means and frequencies[a]
Age	Average 68 years old Range 49–92
Landownership status[b]	
Sole	33 (59%)
Co-owner with spouse	12 (21%)
Co-owner with family	10 (18%)
Lease arrangement	
Cash rent	34 (61%)
Crop share	16 (29%)
Renter relationship	
Family friend or neighbor	11 (20%)
Family member	10 (18%)
Did not specify family friend/neighbor or family member	35 (63%)

[a]Categories not including all 56 women were those who either did not provide a response or were coded as 'other.'

[b]One woman told us she is the sole owner of some parcels and the co-owner with her husband on others, therefore she is counted in both 'sole' and 'co-owner with spouse' categories. Two women did not reveal their landownership status

from 49 to 92 years (Table 1). This average age aligns with TOTAL survey data finding that a majority of female nonoperating landowners are over the age of 65 (USDA Census of Agriculture 2014). In terms of lease arrangement, 34 (61%) women described using a cash rent lease with their renter, the dominant type of lease among nonoperating landowners in general (Bigelow et al. 2016). All the women rent to a male operator and inherited their land.

Our findings show three primary ways of managing the relationship emerged. One group of women managed by the women yielding their power to the renter—that is, allowing him to be the decision maker. A second group managed by holding the power in the relationship. And a third group managed by sharing power with their renter. Demographics for each of the groups are included in Table 2. The specific ways of managing are discussed in detail below.

Yield power

The majority of women (n = 30, 54%) in this study were, at the time they were interviewed, managing their renter relationship by yielding power to their male renter, where the renter made the primary land management decisions regard-

Table 2 Landowner characteristics by category (N = 56)

Landowner characteristics[a]	Yield power (n = 30)	Do not yield power (n = 10)	Share power (n = 16)
Age (average)*	70 years	63 years	67 years
Landownership status*			
Sole	22 (73%)	3 (30%)	8 (50%)
Co-owner with spouse/family[b]	8 (27%)	7 (70%)	7 (44%)
Lease arrangement			
Cash rent	19 (63%)	7 (70%)	8 (50%)
Crop share	8 (27%)	2 (20%)	6 (38%)
Renter relationship			
Family member	8 (27%)	0 (0%)	2 (13%)
Family friend or neighbor	5 (17%)	2 (20%)	4 (25%)
Did not specify family member or friend/neighbor	17 (57%)	8 (80%)	10 (63%)

*$p < .05$

[a]Categories not including all 56 women were those who either did not provide a response or were coded as 'other.'

[b]This includes those who describe their land as a 'family farm,' co-owned with family members

and chi-square analyses) were conducted to test for statistical significance among the groups identified.

Results

We first provide an overall profile of the respondents in terms of various demographics. The average age of the women in this study is 68 years old, with ages ranging

ing their land. Yielding of power is operationalized as renters resisting suggestions from the women and the women not exercising their power as a landowner to push them.

For example, Sandra is 62-years old and is the sole owner of her land. She has used the same renter for over 40 years. Even though she notes that her father tried to set up a good renter situation before his passing, there remain some issues. She states, "I have discovered along the way that a 40-year

relationship is a good and a bad thing. It has been a growth process for me the last 10 years. … Perhaps I was not as best prepared as I should have been… As far as my tenant… hardworking, industrious, honest," she pauses then adds, "I hope." And continues, "Communication is lacking as far as from my perspective. Not that I want to be your best friend, but it seems like more often than not the communication has to be initiated by me. … It's just a fine line to walk. How much is as far as me being the landlord? How much is too much?… There are certain areas where, like the year-end report, stuff like that should be forthcoming from them and I have yet to receive one. Now have I pushed the point? No."

Sally is a 71-year old landowner who co-owns family land with her sister. Her renter managed the land for their parents and has been with the farm for approximately 20 years. When discussing their relationship, she notes, "We trust and respect our farmer very much. … Cover crops and things like that, it's not really an option for us because of what he's doing. … We are just done wanting to be demanding…".

When asked why they yield power and do not push for what they want done on the land, two primary reasons for doing so emerge: the women's perceived lack of knowledge about farming practices (n = 13, 43%), and their desire to keep peace/not cause tension in the relationship (n = 12, 40%).

For example, Laura, age 78, co-owns with her husband. She states, "My farmer just does corn one year and soybeans the next. My husband asked me not too long ago if we would ever let the land lie fallow one year. And I don't know if my farmer would agree to that. So, I just go along with his plan." She justifies this decision by saying, "I guess I am not ag-oriented enough, so I don't know what to ask for." Cassandra is a 63-year old, sole landowner who rents her land to her brother. She discusses her struggles with knowledge and how to communicate with her brother, saying, "I have difficulty with my brother. One of my brothers works the land and I can't talk with him about what my thoughts and goals are for the land. I feel like he can talk circles around me. My long-term goal is that the land could be farmed more sustainably. And that's not going to happen with my brother. He, I think, is very much still into this better living through chemistry thinking, so I really want to educate myself so that I can have a conversation with him about what his long-term goals and what my long-term goals are, and we could find some common ground and move in that direction……And I don't know enough to have a good conversation."

Closely behind the perceived lack of knowledge is the desire to keep peace in the relationship. Donna, a 68-year old sole landowner, describes why she yields to her renter when discussing communication issues with him. "I don't know if I should tell him that I want to talk to him once a month, or how to handle that because he's a neighbor. And I don't want to, you know, upset him. I don't think he would get angry, but I'm not exactly sure." Susan, (age 70) co-owns land with her husband, says, "If they [renters] get testy with us, I guess we can find another farmer, but in the grand scheme of things, I don't want to jeopardize my long-term relationship with these people [renters]." And Abby (69, sole owner) notes; "Well he is a family member, and you trod carefully with family members, you don't want to create a problem in the family. But I would like to be kept more up to date on when [the crop is] planted. I don't always know exactly when the harvest comes out…. I would like to have more current information." Finally, Wilma, 73 and a sole owner, when asked why she did not push for certain practices she wanted done on the land, noted, "I wasn't interested in having any difficulty with them [renters] for sure, but I also think that they were very set in their ways and I, you know, could have made a try, but I'm not so sure that they would go for that." These quotes show the importance to these women of keeping peace in the relationship they have with their renter, and not wanting to disrupt it by being, what they perceive is, too demanding.

The women who manage by yielding power are the oldest among the three groups, with an average age of 70 (Table 2). Seventy three percent of those in the yielding power category are sole owners, the highest among the three groups, and 44% rent either to a family friend/neighbor or family member, also the highest among the three groups of women.

Not yielding

A second way of managing the landowner-renter relationship that emerged in this study was through not yielding to the renter. Ten women landowners (18% of the full sample) are managing in this manner. While not the only way, the primary way these women indicated they claimed power was by firing their renter. Six (60%) of the women in this category have done so.

Nanette is a 65-year old, co-owner of family-owned land. She describes the challenges she has had with her former renter by saying, "I was having problems with him communicating with me…..I just couldn't get him to communicate with me and I was very troubled by that. … I actually fired my farmer." For Claudia, her renter was failing to implement her desired agricultural practices and not stewarding the land according to her values. She is a 49-year old, sole landowner and when she describes her former renter, she says he was an older farmer who did not listen and found questions intrusive and irritating. She describes how she and other women landowners she has talked with have shared their frustrations with their renters, "Our farmers didn't listen to… and it was the older male farmers usually, that didn't listen to us. They just wanted to send us a check and found our questions intrusive and irritating." She then discussed her renter specifically, "He would tell you whatever you wanted to hear, but

he wouldn't do it… and that was irritating. I wanted cover crops, it didn't happen. He told me he put 'em on. I took less money to use it for cover crops, and he didn't do it. And next year, when I realized he wasn't gonna put cover crops on, I paid to have them flown in on my own." She said she thought to herself," I'm gonna fire my farmer. And I did. I did."

Joann is a 67-year old, sole owner of her farm and while not at the firing stage, is in the process of making changes to her renter relationship. As she shared, "This is family land. It's been in my family for seven generations… and I'm gonna get it back to a more responsible approach to farming, that's my goal. It's just a general shift in my thinking and a determination to take my land in a direction that I'm gonna go, because after all it is my land." Regarding her current renter, she says: "I've talked to him, asked him if he would be interested, offered to go halves with him on some of the costs, and he is just absolutely resistant to all of it, so, our relationships gonna come to an end as soon I find a different situation that's gonna better fit my needs."

Marge (age 65 and sole owner of her land) took a different approach in her management, telling us, "I am fifth generation to own the farm. And the first female to own the farm. And when I purchased the farm from my uncle it had been farmed with hay only…and it has been hay only for way too many years and many of the nutrients had been depleted from the soil." She talked about changing her crop rotation and to do this, "I formed a little board of directors if you will, and we met every year…I do cash rent and I do require certain things that's the responsibility of the farmer."

For these women, there was no discussion from them regarding trying or wanting to keep the peace with their renter. This does not necessarily mean it was easy to fire them, but it does suggest that this group of women have put their land management desires and needs above keeping peace in the relationship.

This group is the youngest of the three groups (Table 2), with an average age of 63, has the lowest percentage in sole ownership status (30%) and the lowest percentage of women renting to a family friend/neighbor or family member (20%).

Share power

A third way landowners managed the relationship with their renter was by sharing power with them. Sixteen (29%) of the women landowners in the study were identified as sharing power equally with their renter. This was operationalized as the women working closely with their renter to ensure that their preferred management practices are discussed and often implemented on their land. For all 16 of the women in this category, good communication with their renter emerges in the interviews as the main evidence of the shared power relationship. Loraine, a 66-year old, sole landowner describes the relationship with her renters by highlighting the importance of communication, "I've talked a lot about [new practices] to the guys that farm for me…If I have a question I text either one or call them. And you know, whatever the question is, it's always answered."

Krystal is 60 years old and the sole owner of her land. She details how the conversation went with her renter after she became interested in implementing cover crops on her land, "I asked [renter's name], because I was thinking about putting in the cover crops and he just told me, he says, 'I think that would be great, and that would be the best thing for it.'" Instead of dismissing Krystal's suggestions for the land, Krystal's renter acknowledges her voice and supports her land management wishes.

Connie (age 60) co-owns with some family members. She and her renters are constantly working together to implement practices and are already implementing many of the practices she wants to see on her land. For example, she says, "We've always been pretty conscious about erosion and that kind of thing. And [renter's names] are as well, so we've always kind of talked about that to try to do what we can to keep that [erosion prevention] happening." Similarly, Michelle (age 76) co-owns the land with her husband. They use a crop-share lease arrangement with their two sons who work the land for them. She commends the work of her sons, saying, "They're good guys and they really are doing a good job. They come in and they show me everything they've harvested for the day. And so, I'm involved, I'm involved with them pretty close."

This latter comment connects to the second theme which was identified by a majority of the women in this category. 10 women (62%) noted their knowledge of farming practices as aiding in the shared power relationship. Anne (age 52) co-owns the land with her sister. She describes how she and her sister have worked to create a long-term relationship with their cash lease renters. "I have a really good relationship with all my tenants…I think because I've done what they're doing, because I've farmed it, I know the costs and the stresses and that kind of thing. So, when they have a question or negotiation, or when we've had a couple of bad years in a row or something. I'll work with them because, you know, long term I'm with them to farm the land like my own. I want them to put resources back into the land… so we have a really good relationship." Michelle, 76, co-owns the land with her spouse. She shared, "I worked the fields, up to ten years ago I worked in the fields every day." She then connects her agricultural knowledge to the relationship she has with her renter, "…. the biggest fear I think for women who have someone farming is not knowing if they're putting the right amount of fertilizer on the ground or if they're just depleting it. I mean, that would be my biggest fear but, you know, we work really well together…"

The good communication these landowners noted they have with their renter is intertwined with the agricultural

knowledge these women have. They would not be able to participate in the land conversations with their renter if they did not, as they note, have this knowledge. This group of women has the highest percentage who participate in crop-share with their renter (Table 2), another indication of having confidence in their agricultural knowledge, as crop share typically involves shared decision making. In terms of other demographics, the women who manage their renter relationships by sharing power with them are the second oldest group, and 50% are sole owners.

Discussion

Several main findings emerge from the above analysis. The largest number of women landowners in this study manage the relationship by yielding power to their renter, as we have seen in previous research (e.g., Carter 2017; Carolan 2005; Constance et al. 1996; Gilbert and Beckley 1993; Petrzelka and Marquart-Pyatt 2011; WFAN 2013). The second largest number of landowners manage the relationship by sharing power—a finding that to date has not been acknowledged nor discussed in the literature on landlord-renter relationships. There is also an additional number of landowners who do not cede power, similar to Carter's (2017) 'changemakers.' Unlike Carter's (2017) study, however, none of the women in this study use less confrontational methods (e.g., conflict avoidance) to impose their power. The women here all used direct action such as firing or establishing a board of directors to ensure their desired management practices were being implemented.

In addition, our findings detail how the relationships are not as fixed as typically presented within land tenure research, building upon Carter's work detailing the fluidity of the relationships (2017, 2019). For example, Cassandra, who was at the time of being interviewed managing her relationship by yielding power, is potentially on the path to being someone who takes more active charge, as she increases her agricultural knowledge. As she told us, "I really want to educate myself so that I can have a conversation with [renter] about what his long-term goals and what my long-term goals are, and we could find some common ground and move in that direction…" Nanette, who at the time of being interviewed was managing her relationship by ending it, shows the fluidity of the relationship when she explained that she had been trying to communicate with her renter prior to firing him, thus at one point may have been yielding but with the communication troubles she noted, ended up firing her renter later. These findings show the moving in and out of various manners of management that can occur.[8]

An additional finding is keeping peace in social relationships matters to some landowners, and matters most to older landowners. While not surprising that some of the women feel a need to keep the peace, it is still important to point out it may be, as Carter found in her research (2017, 2019), that the women succumb to social pressures to keep the peace with their renter. Alternatively, this could reflect what Carter (2017) called "surreptitious compromise," where the women plan to implement their own desires for the land, but in a way that is concealed or not made public until a specific time in the future because the cost of dealing with the conflict the decisions may bring on is too great at the moment, showing a temporal element to the relationship.[9]

Those managing by yielding power are the least likely to co-own, while those who do not yield power have the highest amount of co-owner status. These results suggest that co-ownership may matter greatly when looking at how land is managed and the support the principle owner may get from co-owners has implications for her management decisions as they relate to the renter.

Finally, the level of agricultural knowledge a landlord has appears to be critical to how the renter relationship is managed. The findings show those who yield power to their renter believe they are lacking in this knowledge. Those who share power have the knowledge, which aids in the confidence in communicating with their renter. Carter (2019), Eells (2008), and Petrzelka et al. (2020) also found a perceived lack of agricultural knowledge on the part of women landowners as a major reason for ceding power to the renter.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the research on land tenure in several ways. Existing studies explore the marginalization of women in agriculture, but often the focus is specifically on women who yield power (e.g., Carolan 2005; Eells 2008). Yet we find the relationship is much more nuanced than previously shown. Yes, women manage by yielding power, but others manage by not yielding power at all, while still others mutually share the power with their renter. Our findings contribute to the evolving re-orientation of land tenure theory, illustrating how the landowner-renter relationships are not as simple as an either/or situation such as early theories suggest, nor are the relationships static and unchanging. Rather, depending on the point in time, women represent differing ways of managing the gendered relationship within the patriarchal structure of agriculture.

Several limitations exist to our research. First, since all respondents were involved with learning circles and

[8] We thank an anonymous reviewer for this important insight.

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self-selected to be involved (e.g., chose to attend), the sample may overly represent women who are already active land managers, and leaves out those women who did not attend the learning circles. Whether this latter group of women share similar experiences with those involved in learning circles is unknown and contributes to sample bias in our study.

Additionally, this study treats gender as a binary category, with no information on non-binary respondents, nor on race or class, all of which are closely intertwined with power differentials in society, particularly as individuals with historically marginalized identities are most susceptible to discrimination and marginalization in traditionally white, male spaces such as U.S. agriculture (Horst and Marion 2019). As previously indicated, most of previous research refers to white, cisgender women in heterosexual marriages (Leslie et al. 2019). This is also unfortunately a limitation of our research. Diversifying studies of landowners and renters is critically needed, to highlight how varying identities navigate power dynamics in the landowner-renter relationship. We believe this is an important step for future research.

Despite these limitations, this research does help reorient land tenure theory, pushing past the historically dualistic approach that puts the landlord or the renter in the power seat and incorporating into the discussion the patriarchal power structures at play in these relationships. Recognizing the complex ways women landowners manage their land while managing their renter relationship amidst patriarchal power influences has important implications, not only for research but practitioners as well. As Carter notes (2019, p. 895), "In the U.S., women have historically been, and continue to be, excluded from spaces of agricultural knowledge exchanges and decision-making, such as agricultural policy making and USDA or land grant university research (citing Leckie 1996; Sachs 1983; Wells and Eells 2011)." Thus, an effort on developing outreach focused on knowledge building for these landowners interested in learning more about their farmland may help remedy one barrier some landowners face when working with their renter.

We add caution to this recommendation, however, for enormous weight is put on alternative networks as an avenue for these women (e.g., Carter 2019; Petrzelka et al. 2019) and to help fix the bias and discrimination they are facing in terms of being denied access to policies and programs. These alternative networks are critical, but even if women landowners and men who are their renters are able to navigate the shared roles in more equitable ways than existing studies have found, these relationships still exist within a larger system of agricultural policy in which sexism and heteronormativity have been institutionalized within agricultural services (Eells 2008; Fairchild and Petrzelka 2020; Leslie et al. 2019). For if women cede power to renters when they do not have knowledge of their land, programs, or how to get plugged into getting this knowledge, why are these services (e.g., land grant universities, natural resource agencies, USDA) not doing better getting this information to women? The answer lies in part by examining who benefits from this patriarchal agricultural system that is so evident in prior research and this current study's findings. Spaces of agricultural knowledge exchanges, decision and policy making must be open to all. Thus, in addition to reorienting land tenure theory, it is past time to reorient those entities working in agriculture and with agricultural landowners, to stop the institutional discrimination toward various identities, and to move toward a much more inclusive agricultural system.

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