Introduction

Everything we eat has been cultivated in some way. Whether a piece of fruit is non-GMO, organic, laden with pesticides, freeze dried or frozen, it has touched the hands of at least one farmer or agricultural worker. Farmers feed nations, and though globally we have seen a shift to mass produced agriculture, small scale farmers are still essential to our lives and local agriculture communities. Pre-colonial Hawai‘i has a rich history of massive agricultural cultivation that is often overlooked in the context of agrarian history. While many are able to trace the roots of agricultural development, many do not know that women not only participated in ancient agricultural cultivation, but were foundational in said cultivation (Hawkes, 1973). Though historical perceptions of farmers tend to center a normative understanding of a masculinized person, namely men, this was not necessarily the case. Women have historically participated in agriculture and farming, and the notion that farming is only an occupation held by men is relatively recent. Hawai‘i in particular has been and continues to be a site of agricultural cultivation where women and femme identified people actively participate in farming.

Current understanding of women in agricultural/farming spaces in Hawai‘i, and the United States more broadly, is fragmented; few coherent data collection efforts exist. While the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) does conduct a regular census to collect
national and state data, disaggregated by both race and gender, this data is often not available to the public. This leaves significant gaps in understanding exactly what the status of farming is for certain communities. Thus, community and stakeholders are unable to assess communities who are not properly represented within the agricultural and farming industry.

This project seeks to better understand the reality of women farmers in Hawaiʻi, and attempt to fill in the gaps of gender responsive farming and the needs of prospective women farmers who come from diverse backgrounds. This project also aims to better understand women's experiences in farmer training programs in Hawaiʻi, and what led them to enroll in these programs. Additionally this project seeks to understand how entry level farming apprenticeship programs are serving their women farmers and examine the gendered experience of women farmers participating in entry level farming apprenticeship programs. This project will explore the question “What is the status and experiences of women and femme identified people in farming in Hawaiʻi?” This project also seeks to analyze the diverse backgrounds of women farmers participating in entry level farming apprenticeship programs and gain more insight into the racial and ethnic demographics of women participating in entry level farming programs. The ultimate goal of this project is to use the data collected to inform farmer training programs, like GoFarm Hawaiʻi, regarding the needs of women, femme identified, and women of color farmers. I hope to learn more about the lived experiences and lives of women and femme identified farmers in Hawaiʻi and better understand the gendered conditions within the agricultural industry, and the responses from the farmers themselves to such conditions. I also hope to better understand how entry level farm training services like GoFarm prepare women and femme identified farmers for entry into the agricultural industry. While this paper cannot tackle the longstanding issues surrounding women and femme representation and success in the
agricultural industry in Hawai‘i, the purpose is to better understand the experiences of women and femme identified farmers, situated in the specific agricultural geopolitics of Hawai‘i.

The food we eat is often the first act of sovereignty we enact in our lives with our health, and the food we consume is the literal fruit of the labor of farmers. Farming is essential to our wellbeing and survival as humans. Subsequently, farmers are those who hold the power to ensure this well being and survival, and in a world with imminent realities of climate change and ecological collapse, farmers are more vital than ever. However, this essential role that farmers occupy is not politically and culturally neutral, and the demographics of farming in the United States reflect this reality. Additionally the political significance of farmers cannot and should not be understated, with the largest strike in human history being led by rural and Indigenous Indian farmers (Shergil, 2020). Farmer demographics in the United States are not representative of global trends, where the majority of farmers tend to be rural (Price, 2019). Even in many communities within the United States, national farmer demographics of race and gender trends may not be reflected, as is the case in Hawai‘i where the majority of principal producers are identified as full or part Asian and own the land they farm on (USDA, 2017).

The most recent studies show that about 35% percent of farmers in the United States identify as female, with about 56% of farms in the United States having at least one female decision maker (Shearing, 2019). While the status of women in farming in the United States might look promising considering the fact that the United States currently has the most female farmers in the agricultural industry than it has ever had, this is not necessarily the case for further marginalized demographics of women farmers, particularly Black, Indigenous and women of color farmers (Moon, 2019). Gendered demographics of farming are rarely examined in the context of racial and ethnic disparities, yet still the little research that exists indicates that the
status of women of color in farming is far from promising. Nationally 8.1% of women farmers identify as Hispanic, 4.2% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 3.3% as Black or African American, and 1.6% as being of Asian descent (USDA, 2019). In totality this means that women of color farmers represent about 17.2% in the agricultural industry. These reports also do not distinguish between Asian and Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander, which is a vital category in Hawai‘i considering the racial and ethnic historical context and current demographics. Critical gaps in data collection and availability can lead to cycles of agricultural grants that are not responsive to community needs. These disparities in farming representation did not happen by chance. Historically Black, Indigenous and farmers of color in the United States have faced systemic discrimination, particularly Black farmers who have consistently faced barriers in obtaining land to farm on (Philpott, 2020), and these barriers exist till this day. Substantive efforts in the area of farming equity and justice has lead to considerable initiatives and a cultural shift to an ethic of farming that is feminist and anti-racist (Bruil et al., 2020).

These statistics also cannot provide insight into the experiences of the farmers themselves; representation does not equate to equity or positive experiences in the industry. In the context of Hawai‘i, where data access is limited, it is estimated that women of color farmers represent only about 25% of principal producers in the state.¹ The Office of Hawaiian Affairs highlights that of this 25%, Native Hawaiian women represent about 15% of the farming, fishing, and forestry workforce in the archipelago (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2018, 100). Hawai‘i specific USDA data disaggregated for the categories of both gender and race are not available, and therefore OHA statistics and USDA statistics cannot be compared.

Farming in Hawai‘i has a unique history and context compared to that of the continental United States. Particularly, the political significance of farming also represents the struggle of Hawai‘i specific USDA data disaggregated for the categories of both gender and race are not available, and therefore OHA statistics and USDA statistics cannot be compared.

¹ [https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2021/bills/SB1416__pdf](https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2021/bills/SB1416__pdf)
and for the survival of traditional Hawaiian cultural practices, much of which includes the cultivation and farming of kalo or taro (Kagawa-Viviani et al., 2018). Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) are descendants from the kalo plant, and thus have an intimate genealogical connection that substantially impacts the agricultural cultivation of the crop (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2018, 32).

There were farming practices in Hawai‘i that were historically gendered, but ultimately a communal activity predicated upon deeply culturally and spiritually relevant practices (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2018). Despite historical records indicating that men did agricultural work more than women in pre-contact Hawai‘i, on the islands of Maui and Hawai‘i agricultural and farming work “were said to be equitable” (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2018, 88). Agricultural cultivation in pre-contact Hawai‘i utilized the ahupua‘a system, which was engineered in such a way that collective farming efforts were disseminated from mountain to sea, thus engaging in a full systems approach (Kagawa-Viviani et al., 2018). This changed drastically after the invasion of Europeans, and the Great Māhele which considerably altered the existing farming systems. Post-contact agricultural cultivation did differ and moved away from the ahupua‘a system, but under the Hawaiian Kingdom multiracial farming was integral and thrived, in such a way that it was commonplace for ethnically diverse communities to farm together side by side (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2009, 53). During the plantation era, which involved the agricultural cultivation on a massive scale of cash crops such as sugarcane and pineapples, agricultural cultivation was forced to adhere to a system that completely shifted the existing ahupua‘a landscape. Though women on the plantations were often regarded as only caregivers or teachers, about 4,600 women were recorded as sugar plantation laborers, and the majority were married Japanese women (Anderson, 1922, 35). It should be noted however, that census data at this time

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was also fragmented, and though census data was collected in the two main cities in Hawaiʻi, Honolulu and Hilo, roughly ⅓ of women in Hawaiʻi lived in these cities (Anderson, 1922, 36). Concrete data identifying the number of women involved in agricultural cultivation in pre-contact Hawaiʻi and during the plantation period may never be fully accessible, but women's role in agricultural cultivation in Hawaiʻi has been clear throughout history.

Contemporarily the state of farming does not provide food at the level which it used to, and almost 90% of the food consumed in Hawaiʻi is imported (Kurashima et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted long standing community concerns regarding the reliance on imported food in Hawaiʻi. Though some grocery stores did experience food shortages and local food banks continue to experience and increased demand for services, imported food supply itself was not necessarily an issue. However, public perception of reliance on imported food did play a role in shifting attitudes and consumer patterns. Local economic recovery plans specifically emphasized the importance of growing agricultural opportunities for marginalized communities. Efforts to usher in farming equity are active in Hawaiʻi, most recently a Farming Equity Bill has been introduced into the Hawaiʻi State Legislature, demonstrating a social recognition of the systemic barriers that socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers face. This bill emerged as a response to both the systemic issues in farming equity but also the imminent issues surrounding farm production during the COVID-19 pandemic, where rapid community centered food initiatives have taken place. Due to massive state budget cuts, the longevity and sustenance of these programs is quite precarious. Programs that seek to train entry level farmers are fundamental in building up the agricultural workforce. Farmer training programs have even

4 https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2021/bills/SB1416__pdf
been shown to reduce crime in the communities of the participants (Schochet et al., 2008).

Noting the clear benefits to entry level farmer training programs, Schochet et al. (2008) also found that men were more likely to participate in public farmer training programs than women (Schochet et al., 2008). Not only does this demonstrate the existing gaps in the gendered division of enrollment in farmer training programs, but it also demonstrates that farmer training programs may not specifically be targeting communities of women or femme identified people.

Additionally, a number of barriers prevent women and femme identified people from entering into farming, some of which include social stigma, inability to secure childcare, lack of paid opportunities, access to transportation, and language barriers (Fremstad & Paul, 2020 & Glazebrook et al., 2020).

**Methodology**

In order to best connect with women and femme identified farmers who were working within the agricultural industry, I identified GoFarm Hawai‘i, an organization that is a part of the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa College for Tropical Agriculture & Human Resources programs, and seeks to enhance food security & sovereignty in Hawai‘i through training entry level farmers. Entry level farmer training programs are crucial in building up the capacity of regenerative agriculture, or agricultural practices that seek to enhance environmental quality such as biodiversity, top soil health etc, and have been shown to have long term benefits in both urban and rural settings (Mei et al, 2019). GoFarm explicitly trains entry level farmers and prepares them to run profitable small scale farm businesses, and provides extended support beyond the training program.

Initially, female and femme identified participants that had graduated from the GoFarm program were contacted via a GoFarm staff member. Participants were then connected with the
student research (Sarah Michal Hamid) who provided potential participants with the project proposal, description of the project, and consent forms. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, zoom and phone interviews were utilized to conduct the semi-structured interviews. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, I utilized a feminist standpoint theory guided approach to engage with women and femme graduates of the GoFarm farmer training program. GoFarm was consulted throughout the duration of this project, and were primarily consulted around interview questions. A total of 5 women and femme identified farmers were interviewed, and the interviews lasted about 45-60 minutes. The audio files were uploaded to a secure file, transcribed and then discarded. Once the transcriptions were completed, the files were de-identified and coded so that responses would not be identifiable. The themes of relevance in this context include: mention of sexism, gender-based roles, gender-based violence, assumptions, racial background, upbringing, entrance into GoFarm program, experience throughout GoFarm program, and graduation from GoFarm program.

**Interview Questions:**

- Where were you born and raised
- How did you come to farming?
- Is farming or agricultural work your primary source of income?
- What led you to enroll in the GoFarm program?
- How did you feel entering farming as a woman?
- What were the responses from your family and community when you entered into farming?
- On the farm you work on, what is the gendered and racial dynamic?
- What was something that surprised you about entering farming?
- Who do you feel you can rely on if you have a farming related issue?
• How has connecting with other women farmers impacted your experience as a woman farmer?
• In your experience with the GoFarm program, how did the training or ongoing support programs inform and impact the work you currently do?
• When confronted with instances of tension amongst other farmers, how do you choose to navigate these situations?
• What are the primary obstacles that are hindering your agricultural goals?
• What additional support do you need to advance towards your agricultural goals?
• How do you feel that being a woman may affect the way you farm, and what are any unique challenges or benefits you have seen

Findings

Though the participant pool was relatively small, with only five participants, these interviews provided rich insight into the realities of women and femme identified people in farming in Hawai‘i. Of the participants, two identified farming as their primary livelihood and source of income, while two others identified farming as part of their livelihood and source of income. One participant identified themselves as a retiree and thus farming represented their full-time occupation, but did not generate income. The racial demographics of the participants were slightly diverse, with three participants identifying as White/Caucasian and two participants identifying themselves as Hawaiian and/or Asian. The type of farms that the participants worked on was also slightly varied, with three farmers running “one woman” or single producer farms
with occasional support from their partners, one farmer running a farm by herself with the additional assistance of a paid farm laborer, and one farmer working in a community based farming environment. Only one of the participants had an academic background in agriculture, while the others did not. The majority of the participants did grow up around an environment where agricultural or food cultivation was present. These participants expressed that while they did not necessarily work in this agricultural environment, it did influence their upbringing. Two participants explicitly stated that they had children, with one participant having a young child that their partner takes care of, and the other participant having adult children for whom they no longer provide caregiving support. Of the participants who had children, they did not explicitly mention caregiving responsibilities or duties to their children as a barrier to entering into the agricultural industry. When asked about what are the primary obstacles to their agricultural goals, participants responded with the following answers: land access, additional labor, and inaccessible implements. Some participants expressed that while they did not feel that they were necessarily disadvantaged as women or femme identified farmers, at times they did feel that the agricultural industry was not accommodating because they are not men. When discussing the culture of sexism in the agricultural industry, one participant shared “Not that I was treated poorly per se, but, um, there were, you know, moments throughout my experience that, um, became really clear that the industry wasn't designed for someone like me.”

Based on the responses of the five participants, it is evident that experiences of women and femme identified farmers in Hawai‘i are not universal, but there are clear trends. When the question “What are the primary obstacles that are hindering your agricultural goals?” was posed to the participants, four key themes emerged: access to land, access to additional labor, accessible implements, and training in repair of small engines, plumbing etc. The first key theme
of lack of access to land was the most consistent barrier that participants expressed. Access to arable land is a gendered phenomenon across the globe (Ajadi, 2015). The lives of rural and Indigenous farmers are considerably impacted by the barriers to access land, and take form in many ways, whether it be through sexist inheritance and marital laws, rigid loan requirements, or limited allocation of funds for marginalized grounds (Rabenhorst & Bean, 2011). In Hawai‘i in particular, gaining access to arable land, colloquially deemed “ag (agricultural) land”, is an incredibly difficult process, and is further complicated by racial and gendered dynamics. After the Great Māhele in 1848, land buying practices shifted significantly, and while Hawaiian women were able to purchase land and did continue to purchase land, historical assessments of land buying patterns during the early 20th century reveal that “Non-Married, Non-Hawaiian female purchases noticeably increase in frequency, while Hawaiian female purchases essentially cease” (Takahashi, 2009, 15). Though land purchasing dynamics do look different today, having enough intergenerational wealth to obtain a loan for land is a barrier that participants expressed. Though this was only discussed by one participant, the ethnic and racial dynamics of the training program should be given considerable attention. One participant mentioned that “I feel like the ratio of Hawaiian to non Hawaiian was very low. I would say maybe two out of 12 were Hawaiian or had a Hawaiian ethnicity” when describing the dynamics of settlers vs native participants in the program. She went on to further explain that “what I see is a lot of people coming over transit with money and land already and looking to farm and start a homestead”, often referred to as “transplants”, or people who come from the continental United States to settle in Hawai‘i. This dynamic, often filled with tension due to the clear inequities in resources, is one that is prevalent in Hawai‘i but particularly in the agricultural realm.
The **second key theme that emerged was lack of access to additional laborers on their farms.** Only one participant had an additional paid laborer on her farm, and she explicitly hired a male laborer to help on the farm. All other participants did not have additional paid laborers, but it should be noted that one participant works in a community farming setting that is not explicitly a small farm and business and therefore does not have an express need for additional farm labor support. The other three participants who run small “one woman” farms did express that in order to expand their businesses, that additional labor would be needed. However, hiring additional laborers was not financially feasible for these participants for a number of reasons. Additional farm laborers could help women and femme identified farmers expand their small farm businesses, especially if these laborers are able to provide certain skills that they themselves are unable to do. These skills and needs will be further addressed in the final two key themes. The three participants who run “one woman” farms did also express that their partners did support them with certain agricultural tasks, but that this support was not necessarily regular. Some may view having farm support from a partner as being a joint farm, but in the context of agricultural cultivation in small farm businesses, it is not uncommon for partners to help in the capacity they can, but it does not necessarily render them full laborer or employees. This was the case with the three participants who expressed that while they did receive support from their partners, their farms and businesses were theirs and they only reached out for support if needed. These tasks included helping to move heavy items, using implements that were inaccessible to the women and femme identified farmers, and small machinery repair.

The **third key theme that emerged was inaccessible implements, or farm equipment that is used for agricultural development.** While GoFarm trains participants to run small scale business farms, implements are often still needed to cultivate produce. Implements include but are not
limited to equipment such as tractors, plows, harrows etc, and are tools that are used to further advance agricultural cultivation. Many, if not the majority of farming implements are designed for men and larger body types, and thus women farmers are almost inherently placed at a disadvantage when attempting to utilize such tools. Participants expressed that because most implements are designed for larger male bodies, that they are often unable to use these implements without frustration or fear of injury. As a result they are sometimes unable to complete certain tasks and thus rely on the support of their partner or their additional paid farm laborers. When sharing her difficulties with working with implements, one farmer shared “I was definitely made more aware that women in farming are still considered like not normal” and continued to share that if she was unable to change an implement or utilize it, that this could be a “day stopper”. While this important theme that emerged through the interviews cannot be attributed to the GoFarm training program itself, it is indicative of larger issues of sexism in the agricultural industry that have refused to accomodate to women and femme identified farmers.

The fourth and final key theme that emerged was lack of training in necessary repair skills such as small machine repair, plumbing, or electrical repair. Culturally we also see that women and femme identified people are discouraged from engaging in or learning these kinds of skills, and rather see women and femme identified people encourages to learn skills such as sewing and cooking. Though “home ec” classes in high school are often no longer required, many of these participants were a part of a generation where women were not just discouraged but actively prevented from learning skills that were deemed to be “manly”. Additionally, many of their parents believed that these “manly” skills should not be taught to them and rather should be taught to their male cousins, brother, etc. A participant shared that these kinds of skills were not “definitely not like, it's not something that like I grew up with and I don't know, I'm trying to
think of an example, but there's certain basics that anyone who grew up like fixing a car with their father or their grandfather, you know, like the kind of like typically male things that you might do as, as a kid would have the experience to notice”, which fundamentally shaped the way that she was able to engage with certain farm related activities or issues. While the GoFarm program does not claim to train farmers in these kinds of skills, if women and femme identified farmers are not learning this through another venue, it leaves women and femme identified farmers chronically underprepared to handle agricultural situations where these skills are necessary. One participant candidly shared that “I was looking into like taking a welding class at Leeward and like, it'd be so awkward. I don't know anything about it. I'm going to be the only girl in the class and I'm going to suck at it because I've never done anything like that before.” Not only are community college based classes not feasible for many, due to cost, transportation and time restrictions, but also because of the stigma that comes with entering these spaces. The cycle of not training women and femme identified farmers in these areas during their formative years, not recieving further training when they are about to enter the agricultural workforce, and the stigma and barriers to receiving education later on in life has largely led to a generation of women and femme identified farmers who are forced to rely on outside support, typically from men. This leads to the further pervasiveness of cultural attitudes that women and femme identified farmers will never have the same skillset as male identified farmers, because there are skills that they are simply unable to do. However, if women and femme identified farmers were taught these skills whether it be in a personal, academic, community based or professional environment we would not see these barriers contiinously prevent the success of women and femme identified farmers.
In addition to these four key main themes, three less prominent themes were also identified throughout the interviews, which include support from GoFarm coaches past completion of the program, the culture within the agricultural industry and the expectations of women and femme identified farmers as both farmers and women and femme identified people. One critical aspect of the GoFarm training program is the prolonged engagement with farmers who have graduated from the training program. GoFarm “coaches” continue to check in with the graduates and often support them with advice for farming related issues, if asked. When the participants were asked if they felt comfortable reaching out to their GoFarm coaches, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. All participants expressed that they did feel comfortable asking for advice in the long term, and one participant even expressed that they “definitely, 120000%” felt like the GoFarm coaches are supportive. This finding is not necessarily explicitly related to the examination of the gendered experience as a farmer, but it does indicate that long term community farming assistance does help to support these women and femme identified farmers. Another theme that did emerge was the culture within the agricultural industry. Many participants shared that while they did not feel discrimination on the basis of gender, that they did feel that the industry fosters a culture that is not friendly to small scale farmers. When articulating this culture in the industry, a participant shared “I don't think on the legislative political level, it's very supportive of small scale agriculture at all. I just think that there's too many, um, old boy networks, big plantations, big commercial people, making decisions on our behalf that don't really look at the small scale farmer. It's not necessarily men versus women. It's more big crop, big brother, versus us a little bit.” This culture within the industry does have an impact on the expectations of women and femme identified farmers, which brings me to my final point about the expectations of women and femme identified farmers as
both farmers and women/femme identified people. By this I mean that sexist expectations of a woman who “does it all”, providing caregiving duties such as cooking, cleaning and childcare all while working full time. Though many participants shared that they did not feel they experienced direct instances of sexism in the agricultural industry, the issue of childcare and reproductive labor continued to come up. A participant shared “I would say in general, as a woman farmer, we're expected to do everything a man is expected to do, you know, all the farm chores, the business aspect, and we're also expected to go home and cook and clean and take care of the kids. Where as a man isn't necessarily expected to do both as stupid and as old as that sounds, I believe that still a stigma to this day”, which demonstrates that there is more nuance to the experiences of women and femme identified farmers beyond simply their work in the field.

**Conclusion**

Experiences of the participating women and femme identified farmers were not and are not universal by any means, yet through gathering the stories of these farmers critical themes have emerged that give insight into the experiences of women and femme identified farmer in Hawai‘i. The history of farming framed as a male occupied profession combined with the existing dynamics of contemporary patriarchy in land access, implements, inadequate teaching of skills and access to capital continue to shape the experiences of women and femme identified farmers in Hawai‘i. Through the interviews conducted with these women and femme identified farmers in Hawai‘i, it becomes clear that the GoFarm entry level farmer training program is supportive of women and femme identified farmers in Hawai‘i. Expressions of sexism and misogyny within the agricultural industry cannot be controlled by GoFarm, but should be critically examined in order to properly create environments that adapt to the needs of women and femme identified farmers. Issues that arose such as inaccessible implements point towards a
larger issue of sexism in the agricultural industry that does not seek to even foster an environment where women and femme identified farmers can work. Additionally, land and labor access are issues across Hawai‘i that are emblematic of deeper rooted issues like US settler colonialism, that cannot be resolved through entry level farmer training programs. However, as these interviews indicate, women and femme identified farmers understand and are impacted by the massive inequities in access to agricultural land and labor in Hawai‘i. As the agricultural community continues to grow, these realities for women and femme identified farmers, particularly for Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) farmers should be carefully noted and respected. Themes that could be further explored in this area include the role of mothers and caregivers as farmers and experiences as women farmers in small scale business communities. Despite these challenges, it is clear that women and femme identified farmers are paving a powerful path in the agricultural industry. In order to improve the conditions for women and femme identified farmers in the agricultural industry substantive shifts must be made in areas of land access, labor access, implement design, and training in necessary technical skills.
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