At recent local food conference in Toronto, Canada, I opened my presentation by commenting on the impressively large numbers of women, young people, and racial and ethnic minorities in the audience. I suggested that the stereotypical old, white men were not going to give up control of the food system without a fight, so we need to be prepared to take it away from them. When I sat down, a female fellow panel member remarked to me that the women’s movement is very complementary to the sustainable food movement. I replied, almost without thinking, “The sustainable food movement is a women’s movement.” I perhaps should have called it a women-led movement, for the sake of accuracy.

Even in the early 1990s, I had observed that leadership positions in sustainable agriculture educational programs were dominated by women. At an educational event hosted by a Native American tribe in Idaho, male and female participants were asked to sit at separate long tables for the evening meal—as was traditional for the tribe. We were to fill the chairs from the front toward

**Why an Economic Pamphleteer?** Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. I spent the first half of my academic career as a free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. During the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t working and wasn’t going to work in the future—not for farmers, rural communities, consumers, or society in general. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark the needed revolution in economic thinking.
the back of the room. I quickly noticed that the women’s table was filled to a length more than twice as long as the men’s table.

Many of the sustainability program leaders in universities, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations are and have been female. Sustainable-minded farmers may still be mostly male, but the numbers of women farmers are growing. Young women farmers are providing leadership for national young farmer organizations such as the National Young Farmers Coalition (National Young Farmers Coalition, n.d.) and The Greenhorns (The Greenhorns, n.d.). The 5th Annual Women in Sustainable Agriculture Conference brought more than 300 women farmers, ranchers, and educators together in Portland, Oregon, in 2016 (Adams, 2016).

At events I attend in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere, the leadership of the sustainable/local food movement tends to be dominated by women.

I believe many women have always been interested in farming and food-related issues, where positions of leadership traditionally have been reserved for men. Sustainable agriculture is seen by many of these men as a challenge to their male-dominated way of farming. This has left opportunities open for bright, articulate, motivated women of all ages to take on leadership responsibilities. I believe also that the guiding principles and characteristics of sustainable farms and food systems are more in harmony with personality traits of females than males. Industrial agriculture is about forcing nature to produce more cheap commodities, whereas sustainable agriculture is about nurturing nature so it can produce enough good food.

At events I attend in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere, the leadership of the sustainable/local food movement tends to be dominated by women.

I believe many women have always been interested in farming and food-related issues, where positions of leadership traditionally have been reserved for men. Sustainable agriculture is seen by many of these men as a challenge to their male-dominated way of farming. This has left opportunities open for bright, articulate, motivated women of all ages to take on leadership responsibilities. I believe also that the guiding principles and characteristics of sustainable farms and food systems are more in harmony with personality traits of females than males. Industrial agriculture is about forced nature to produce more cheap commodities, whereas sustainable agriculture is about nurturing nature so it can produce enough good food.

Psychologists tend to rely on the “Big Five” personality traits to define gender differences (Weisberg, DeYoung, & Hirsh, 2011). They are Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Openness/Intellect. Women tend to rank higher in neuroticism, which is generally associated with anxiety and self-consciousness. But related traits such as emotionalism and sensitivity...
can also sharpen intuition and insight. Males tend to be more rational and ideological, which can lead to conceit and rigidity. Women consistently rank higher for agreeableness, which is associated with empathy, altruism, and kindness. Men tend to be more egocentric, self-centered, and indifferent.

Women also rank higher in conscientiousness, which is associated with organization and self-discipline. Men tend to be more opportunistic and sporadic. Women rank only slightly higher in extraversion, as they relate more comfortably with others. Men are inclined to take more social risks. No significant gender differences have been found for openness/intellect, which reflect imagination, creativity, and intellectual curiosity. However, the focus of imagination, creativity, or exploration may well be different for men and women. These gender differences obviously do not apply to all women or men, which is confirmed by various studies showing significant overlap along the gender trait continua.

Regardless, the gender traits generally associated with being female are far more consistent with the requisites for sustainability than those of males. Old, white men have had a natural leadership advantage in the mechanical world envisioned during the Enlightenment and imposed upon the world during the industrial era of economic development. We now know that world is not sustainable. The worldview essential for sustainability is that of a resourceful, resilient, regenerative living organism rather than an inanimate mechanism. Living things must be conceived, nurtured, cared for, and renewed rather than built, managed, worn out, and discarded. Creating a sustainable food system is much more like raising a child than building an automobile. Communities and societies are sustained by considerate, cooperative, collaborative, consolatory, caring, compassionate relationships.

Creating a sustainable food system is much more like raising a child than building an automobile. Communities and societies are sustained by considerate, cooperative, collaborative, consolatory, caring, compassionate relationships.

At the deepest level, the sustainability movement is a morally rooted movement born of a growing sense of our responsibility to take care of each other and to care for the earth. It represents a “fusion of spirituality and social justice.” Sustainability will require a “new kind of political activism that’s guided and sustained by spirituality.” Hillary Clinton’s loss in her bid for the U.S. presidency was a deep disappointment for the women’s movement. She likely lost the votes of many old, white, men who felt threatened by the thought of a woman president. She probably lost the votes of even more who feared she would accommodate the “establishment”—the old, white, men. Many of today’s women political leaders were elected because they lead like old, white men. I believe the American people ultimately will elect a woman president who has the courage to think and lead like a woman. I believe the sustainability food movement ultimately will succeed because it is an essential part of a global women-led movement that is creating a better future for humanity.

References