

## Women in Leadership Positions in Canadian Agriculture

MARY ROBINSON | PEI AGROMART LTD. [ALBANY, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND]

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Mary Robinson has deep roots in agriculture, so it's no surprise that outside of her work in her family ag business she's dedicating her time to making the whole industry more robust.

A sixth generation on her family's farm operation, and third in their agribusiness, Mary actually didn't expect to be working in agriculture when she first left for university. She certainly didn't predict the opportunities she'd be given to affect change within the industry in PEI and across Canada.

After studying economics and business at Acadia University, Mary took her parents' advice and struck off, backpacking through Australia and Europe, as well as working in Scotland with a (potato) agronomist and in a potato processing facility. She came back to Canada spent time working outside of agriculture across the country.

"My parents (John & Hazel) married young, started a family and came home to the farm very early in their adult lives. They were particularly keen in encouraging me to travel, to broaden my perspective and do the things they didn't have a chance to do before starting a family and settling down."

Eventually though, she made her way back to the Island and her agricultural roots.

"I don't know if it's a Prince Edward Island thing or if it's an agriculture family thing. Coming home made the most sense," Mary says.

Now living and working on the Island, Mary's "hat collection" is diverse. Mary and her cousins, Andrew and Lori, actively manage their family's businesses that include a farm and potato packing operation, the PEI Agromart, a produce dealership, and Island Lime. As a certified crop-advisor, Mary is most involved with Island Lime, their custom lime application business.

"I work with producers from tip to tip in PEI, helping interpret soil results and making lime recommendations. Going to work, shoulder to shoulder with people who are passionate about doing their job well is probably my favourite part. I work with a great crew, that makes our work more rewarding and enjoyable."

When Mary isn't working in the family agri-business, she sits on a few boards including the PEI Federation of Agriculture, the Centre for Food Integrity, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC).

"There are so many opportunities to be involved and part of a group working to improve Canadian agriculture. It's endless."

### Addressing the industry's challenges

Her work on various boards and federations continues to morph into new opportunities. Currently the chair of CAHRC, Mary says the council's mandate to develop solutions to address labour needs of Canadian Agriculture is a huge task. She feels strongly that lack of reliable, quality labour is one

of the biggest limiting factors for Canadian agriculture being profitable and sustainable now, and even more so in the future.

“A lot of farms are so busy trying to get the job done that they don't have time to address the fact there is a dwindling pool of labour.” Mary says. “The Barton report identified agriculture as the largest opportunity for economic growth in Canada and yet we don't have the people power to really make that happen. There are big gains to be made are in discussing our labour situation in Canada and coming up with solutions. CAHRC is doing that through programs like SAWA (Supporting the Advancement of Women in Ag). A project to strengthen business success for women working in agriculture.”

### Leveling the field

Like most people who work in agriculture, Mary works varied hours with seasons requiring long days and full weeks. She and her husband, Mike, have 2 school age kids with Mike as the primary caregiver in their home. She says more often she's seeing roles not being determined by gender but rather people playing to their strengths and interests.

The playing field in agriculture has become more even for men and women Mary says, but incidents that undermine are still taking place.

Recently Mary was invited to speak out of province on behalf of an agriculture organization she was involved with. After her three male counterparts completed their presentations, it was her turn at the microphone. The host set the stage for her presentation by introducing her as “the dessert”. Mary says she went from feeling honoured to speak on behalf of her organization to feeling belittled and discredited. At the time, she chose to say nothing because she didn't want her organization embroiled in negative publicity and instead wanted the audience to pay attention to the message she was delivering. After the fact, she communicated with the host organization in an attempt to bring awareness to the unacceptable introduction.

“Locally I see less sexism than what we experienced years ago. Now I see a lot of folks in male-female farm and ag business partnerships where the duties are not automatically assigned because of gender but instead playing to strengths and interests. I know couples where Mom does the milking while Dad mows with their 19-month-old daughter strapped into her bucket seat in tractor's buddy seat. And Dad changes diapers on the headlands. Initially I found myself justifying that speaker's introduction with “he didn't mean it *that way*”. Then a friend asked me how I'd feel if he'd introduced my daughter as dessert. That changed my perspective. Looking at that as a mother, it was not acceptable and could not be explained away.”

Mary thinks one part of the solution to sexism and underrepresentation in agriculture would be for farm organizations to go through self-evaluation exercises. Who is sitting around the table? Why aren't there more women and other kinds of diversity represented? What kind of image is our organization projecting? What do folks outside of our organization think we represent?

“We all need to continue to create awareness in agriculture and that there's true strength in diversity.”