



SUCCESS FOR WOMEN
IN AGRI-FOOD

Needs Assessment Report

JUNE 10, 2016
AGRICULTURE AND FOOD COUNCIL

Develop and Implement Comprehensive Approaches to Increase Economic Outcomes for Women in Alberta

Success for Women in Agri-Food Needs Assessment Report June 2016

1.0 Introduction

As a means to identify barriers women ag-entrepreneurs face in rural Alberta, Agriculture and Food Council of Alberta undertook the research project *Success for Women in Agri-Food*. Based on information gathered across the province of Alberta, the objective is to develop and implement a pilot program to address barriers to increasing the capacity and success of women within the regional food system. This report will document those key findings, areas of priority and recommendations for next steps to address those barriers.

For reference in the report below, the term agri-food will be used to encompass industries across the value chain of the agriculture and food sectors from primary food production to value added and processing using agricultural products, including specialty or niche food markets.

- **Methodology**

There were a number of methods used to collect data for analysis for this project to gain a well-rounded perspective in which to assess the current situation.

1. Primary Data Sources (Qualitative)
 - a. Discovery Session
 - b. Online Survey
 - c. Telephone Interviews
 - d. Focus Groups
2. Secondary Data Sources
 - a. Review of existing or current research available
 - i. Existing programs for women in agri-food in Alberta, Canada, and internationally
 - ii. Documented barriers to women in agri-Food in Alberta
 - b. Review of available statistics from organizations and government

Discovery Session

The initial discovery session was held in October 2015 to obtain industry perspectives from both men and women as to the scope and purpose of project, including insights to barriers for women ag-entrepreneurs from their perspectives. There was a diverse group in attendance, with 23 women and 4 men participating. There was representation from organizations along the value chain, from primary to

processing, including government, as well as women ag-entrepreneurs. The format included both facilitated large group and small group discussions.

Online Survey

The online surveys were completed during the month of February 2016. There were 159 responses, 153 women and 6 men. The age ranges were diverse, however the majority were in the 31-45 yrs and 46 – 65 years of age (Figure 1) with a large number representing primary agriculture followed by value added (Figure 2).

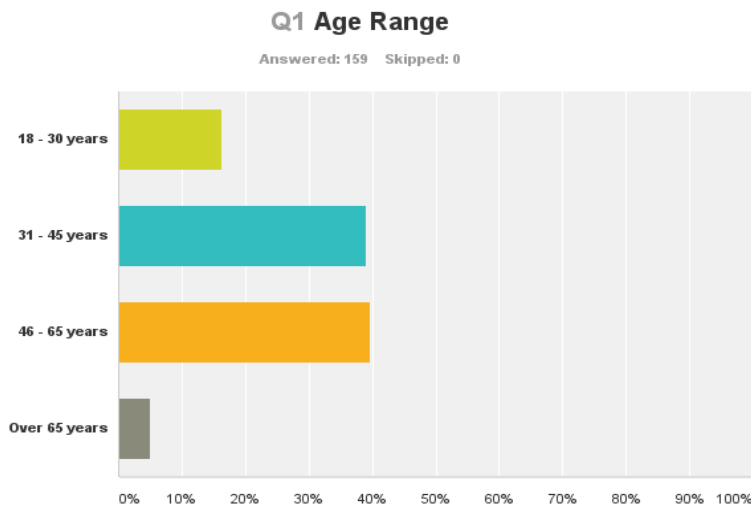


Figure 1.

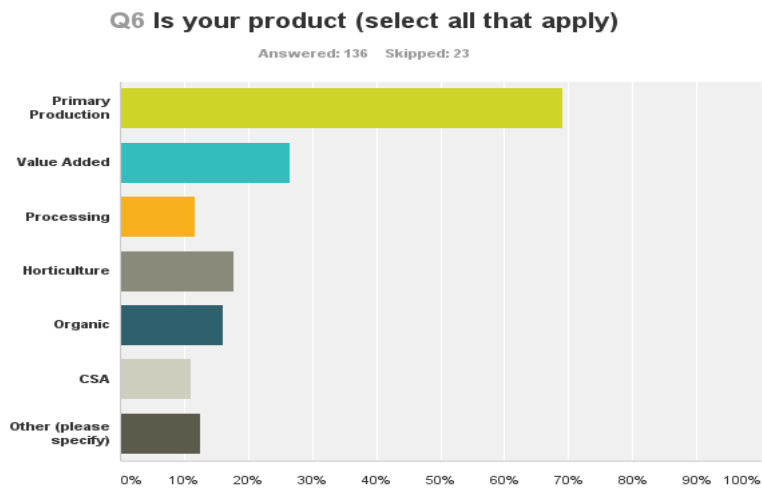


Figure 2.

Telephone Interviews

Twenty-two telephone interviews have been completed to date, 19 women and 3 men. The interview participants reflected all segments in agri-food from crops, cow-calf, feedlot, niche markets such as Community Sustainable Agriculture enterprises and market gardens, specialty - organic, food production, and those working with women ag-entrepreneurs and government staff.

Focus Groups

Four Focus Groups were held across Alberta during the months of April and May 2016. The first one in Peace River was cancelled due to lack of participation. Fifty-two women were reached in total through the remaining four Focus Groups that were held in Lac La Biche, Parkland County, Olds, and Lethbridge.

Strengths and Limitations on Data

The existing research data collected (secondary data sources) and our own qualitative research (primary data sources) were reviewed and analyzed to provide the basis for the needs assessment report and recommendations to address the barriers for women ag-entrepreneurs in rural Alberta.

In the search for documented research relevant to women in agri-food, it was found there was limited resources and data available specific to women ag-entrepreneurs in Canada, and even less so, to women in Alberta. A review of the research, which included international sources such as the United States, Australia, and Brazil, formed the basis for our own questions leading into the next stages of research. These next stages included questions to identify the gaps and barriers in agri-food specific to women in rural Alberta to be used in the surveys, interviews, and Focus Groups.

There is a lack of data available to give a complete understanding of all operating value added businesses, food processing or niche market businesses led by women or with women in management roles in rural Alberta. Some women ag-entrepreneurs operate as small businesses using farmer's markets as their market test phase or market access, but are not formally documented in the Census or reported. It is estimated however, that over 50% of vendors participating at local Farmer's Markets are women, though it is unknown how many are from rural Alberta vs urban centers. The other challenging issue in identification is the diversified businesses, though led by the women on farm, may not be recognized as separate entities but included with the farm primary business data. There is no gender data recorded by Alberta Farmer's Market Association, Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Association, or Alberta Food Processing Association where their members are involved in food processing, value added, niche or specialty market products, or farmer's markets.

- **Overview of Current Situation of Agri-Food and Women's Participation**

Traditionally and historically agriculture has been an industry led by men, from the grass roots of primary production to policy decision-making. Their responsibilities were to grow the crops, raise the livestock, market their production and contribute to industry concerns and policy decisions through

board and committee participation. Women's traditional roles were to be the caregivers, responsible for domestic duties, and to help out where and when needed. This has certainly evolved over the years where women have become much more involved in the agri-food operations as bookkeepers, operators in crops and livestock, marketers, diversified markets and product development, business managers and decision makers, but it is felt there are gender biases still do exist in agriculture today. The reflection of women's involvement as farm operators is acknowledged in the following data 2011 Census of Agriculture data.

Demographics for Female Farm Operators According to the 2011 Census of Agriculture

According to the 2011 Census of Agriculture report, Alberta farms have declined in number by 19.4% to 43,234 farms. Farm operators, defined as those persons responsible for the management decisions in operating an agricultural operation, have also declined to 61,605, a decline of 19.2% from 2001. During that same period, female operators also declined 17.5% to 17,965, although the average proportion of female operators, as calculated of total farmers in 2011, remained stable at 30.0%.

The Census report also indicated that the number of farm operators, whose main occupation was farming, has been in decline. For both men and women, off farm employment has become increasingly common. In 2001 there was 44.4% of female operators whose main occupation was farming, decreasing to 38.3% in 2011. This suggests, in addition to their farm operations, alternate sources of revenue are being sought for financial support.

The age of female farm operators is also getting older according to the Census, with the average age of Alberta female operators increasing from 48.0 years in 2001 to 53.3 years of age in 2011. Female operators under the age of 35 years has also been declining over the years, decreasing from 12.7% to 7.5% of the total number of female farmers, indicating fewer young women are choosing farming as their occupations. The increase in age of female farmers is also reflected for those over 55, with the number increasing from 29.6% to 47.1% of the total number of female farmers from 2001 to 2011.

In terms of education of operators, the 2011 Census reported that the percentage of Alberta farm operators with university degrees is increasing. Proportionately, 16.2% female farm operators acquired a university degree, compared to 10.3% of male operators.

Diversification and Value Adding

Diversification and value adding activities help to counter the fatal equation that has undermined the sustainability of farm and associated rural communities. The trend in mainstream agriculture today has been to increase the size of the enterprise, specialize to a key market, replace labor with machinery, and utilize special machinery, buildings and agro chemicals. This model pursues economies of scale but neglects economies of scope, which has created many more losers than winners and has led to depopulation, dependency, and stagnation of rural economies. In addition to this, increased cost of inputs, market volatility, and weather disasters necessitate the need for off farm income for additional financial support as indicated by the Census reports or diversified on farm sources of revenue or a combination of both. While diversification does not automatically address all these issues, and is itself by no means easy or assured, diversification can be a central component of viable, sustainable, and

sustaining rural development. We have seen that there is an increasing trend that women are the key enablers to farm diversification, and increased financial sustainability of the operation. Women today play significant roles in Community Sustainable Agriculture, horticulture, direct farm marketing, niche market development, and value added and processing as partners or leaders of the operations. But programs, services, and policy structures available today do not sufficiently address the needs of women farmers who want to diversify and participate in regional food systems. Programs designed to enhance smallholder productivity must go beyond a focus on technical agricultural issues to address the underlying gender-related norms, priorities and constraints that may prevent women farmers from reaching their full potential. The abundance of information available to agricultural based businesses is increasing while knowledge transfer is declining. Institutional information programs and services are being elevated and given greater credence than that gathered by farmers through decades of hands on experience. There is information overload, leading to an abundance of resources that go unused as people are unable to find them at the time they are most needed. Programs and services are linear in nature and do not respond adequately to the dynamic nature of today's business. We need to look at a model that enables today's high growth agriculture based women ag-entrepreneurs the ability to seek out the expertise they need "just in time", meaning being able to select or deploy resources that are needed a specific time for a specific pre-determined outcome and possibly at no other time.

Educational Programs, Networks, Resources and Social Networks

Businesses, whether start ups or scale ups, have a much stronger chance of success when the entrepreneur's skill sets are strong, both business management and technical, networks have been established to learn from one another and share experiences or capture opportunities working together, as well as knowledge and access to the appropriate needed resources when needed.

Academic business programs are available in Alberta, including the Business Schools at the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, and recognized business programs at other academic institutions in the province. These are formal accredited programs available on line or face to face with significant time requirements for completion. There are also several business networks that provide networking opportunities through regular meetings and events, but not necessarily easily accessible to those living in rural Alberta. Alberta Women's Entrepreneurs offers programs and resources specific to women in business, but again not easily accessible geographically to those women ag entrepreneurs in rural Alberta or fit all sizes of businesses. There are also programs and information for business development available from other organizations such as Business Link and Economic Development offices across the province. There are few business education programs available and delivered in rural Alberta specifically to women, and even less specifically to women in agriculture. The exception would be the Grazing School for Women offered by Alberta Agriculture and Forestry along with other industry partners.

Canadian Total Excellence in Agricultural Management (CTEAM) is a national agricultural business management program available to ag-entrepreneurs nationally. While not offered as a program specific to women, the attendance of women has increased in the last 10 years overall. More couples are attending together, with the women taking positions of responsibility and decision-making authority, as well as daughters who are working with their parents to take over the business. The number of women attending the program operating as the sole operator and decision maker is very low and has shown no

increases. While the overall number of women is increasing due to partnerships, the number of men participating in the program is still significantly more than the number of women.

In years prior to the early 2000's, extension programs were offered through Alberta Agriculture's local District Home Economists, District Agriculturists, which offered many short courses on business management skill development and other networking opportunities specific to agri-food entrepreneurs and specific needs to the local communities were being addressed. Due to provincial funding cuts and restructuring in the early 2000's, these programs were discontinued or restructured. Numerous resources and specialists are available to ag-entrepreneurs currently through Alberta Agriculture and Forestry through their Specialists for individual business consultations and group workshops and to help with available programs. Alberta Agriculture and Forestry together with industry partners does offer a successful program specific to women cattle producers, The Grazing School for Women. This programs offers information and sessions on forage production, recordkeeping, livestock handling and more.

In the United States, there is significant investment in extension programs unique and specific to women in agri-food, mostly affiliated with State universities. There are state programs as well as national programs, both of which provide educational resources, conferences, workshops, information and resources, leadership capacity building, encouraging participation in policy, all in supportive, open environments for women. The purpose of these not for profit organizations is to support the development of women ag entrepreneurs from primary to value added and processing to build their skills, confidence, recognition and to increase business capacity and success and encourage contribution to policy discussions, advocating and decision making. The national organizations include Women Food Agriculture Network and American Agri-Women. Many of the state programs run specific educational programs such as Annie's Project, an educational program dedicated to strengthening women's roles in modern agri-food businesses.

Australian Women in Agriculture is also committed to ensuring that women influence the agricultural agenda. Their purpose is to achieve this by ensuring their members are informed, enabling them to influence decision making at all levels.

In Canada, women in agriculture are gaining momentum and interest. The Advancing Women – Life Skills for Leadership (Women in Ag Conference) takes place over two days with both a western event held in Calgary, Alberta and an eastern conference held in Toronto, Ontario. This conference focuses on developing leadership skills to pursue executive and senior management positions in agriculture, personal finance, communication, and relationship building. Ag Women's Network in Ontario is a social network available for women ag-entrepreneurs. It has gained significant momentum over the last year. There are also national Women's Business Networks and resources available online for women entrepreneurs of all types as well as Canadian Women in Food, a resource available for women working in every aspect of food.

Policy Discussion and Roles in Decision Making

In Alberta and across the country, there are initiatives to encourage women to participate on boards because of the recognized advantages and benefits of having diversity, both gender and skill based.

There is also encouragement for organizations to consider women when looking for nominations. Both these extend beyond the agri-food sector, for business and organizations across the board. These initiatives include Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council's project *Supporting the Advancements of Women in Agriculture* which is examining women in leadership role, how to promote and encourage women to participate on boards and take leadership positions, developing a suite of instructive reference materials for Boards and employers to improve the accessibility of opportunities for women. Women on Boards was actively looking for resumes of women this past spring to submit to a database that could be accessed when looking for prospective board candidates.

4.0 Key Findings

Through our initial survey, interviews and Focus Groups our participants identified different types of barriers related to their work as farmers and agricultural-entrepreneurs. We have grouped them into main categories.

Finance & Other Skill Development

Through the survey, finance was identified as the number one barrier to women ag-entrepreneurs. Women found it difficult to gain access to capital (loans, grants) for their businesses, either from the bank or other granting institutions. This was in part, due to the fact that the participants thought they were unequipped to demonstrate what lenders require or they did not know how to identify or access the appropriate lending/granting institutions or where to look for other alternate sources of financing. Participants also responded in the interviews that they felt they weren't being taken seriously in their business endeavors, or their role within the business was either not understood and accepted or respected from the lender. The author also learned that women felt, whether they were start up businesses or established, their overall general financial acumen and knowledge of business management skills was not strong enough and needed to be further developed. Some women communicated that choosing to stay at home to raise their children had long-term impacts on their personal financial situation and ability to raise capital for seed money, causing them to require dependence on co-signers to obtain financing for their agri-food business. This was not true for all women participants, but financial issues were identified and supported as key barriers in our interviews and Focus Groups as well.

Because it is often difficult to attend training sessions due to cost, distant locations and time commitment including that for travel, women did not always feel their business acumen and other related skills were as good as they should be. They felt that their business management skills from basic bookkeeping skills to financial analysis, human resource management, and marketing and communication were inadequate. Further, some even thought their technical production skills could be improved, but were unsure how to do this. An open supportive environment to participate in courses was communicated as being an important factor, to ensure women felt comfortable to ask questions without being intimidated by the thought of "asking a dumb question".

Other Commitments

Women strongly identified that second to finance, the complexities of their responsibilities of other commitments being off farm jobs, childcare, extended family care, domestic responsibilities, volunteering – wearing a number of hats at one time – all had a significant impact on their ability to work on their agri-food business.

Throughout the interviews and Focus Groups for women ag-entrepreneurs in rural Alberta, childcare was discussed at length as a barrier. Participants communicated that if one was not fortunate enough to have a support system in place and nearby, either family or friends to care for children when needed, there were few affordable options available in part due to the rural remoteness.

Networking and Access to Information

One component to accessing information is the ability to network. Time and again, women lamented the fact that they had no opportunity or central resource to network with other professional women and agri-food entrepreneurs. Many spoke of their desire for membership in a larger, supportive community of women in business, but didn't know where to find such groups. While it was recognized there are social networks available online, Internet stability and availability in some areas were issues to maximize these resources. Many of the business networking events are held in Edmonton or Calgary, which become prohibitive to attend because of travel, time and cost for those women ag-entrepreneurs in rural Alberta and if held on weekdays those with off farm jobs required them to take the day off in order to attend.

It was noted access to information could be difficult. Not for lack of that available, but simply too much information to try and sift through. Acronyms and terms commonly used by those who work in the industry are not necessarily the terms ag-entrepreneurs know and are looking for when doing searches to find the relevant information they are seeking. Policy and regulation are most difficult to navigate and understand, first where to find it, and then who to ask. It is ever changing and being updated and a time consuming task to make sense of.

Accessible networking opportunities were discussed to be important, with face-to-face being the most preferable. It was felt through networking, one had the potential to open up opportunities, increase one's knowledge of available resources, learn what's happening in the industry, and build relationships that are key to any business.

Mentorship

The value of role models has long since been established. They represent the achievement of success and what people can aspire to, learn from, and hope to achieve themselves. They are positive examples for others, to inspire them to act on their ideas, move forward, and take on challenges. Women spoke of the lack of known female mentors and role models in their sector, and the constant deferral to men in those positions. While men can be good business mentors, they do not provide the same link to

experiences women share because of gender. Women ag-entrepreneurs expressed that they want to learn from women role models who overcame some of the same challenges up and coming ag-entrepreneurs face including how they captured opportunities in a male dominated industry. The desire to learn of those women ag-entrepreneurs and of their success stories was strongly communicated.

Living in Rural Alberta

Geographical isolation in rural Alberta was identified by the participants as a significant barrier to their success. Geography contributes to a number of other barriers: personal and professional isolation, lack of reliable Internet, huge costs associated with traveling away from the farm, and lack of access to childcare. Access to available business resources needed was identified as a significant issue, as many of these are located in major centers. Lack of access to networks and availability of education programs was also noted as limitations.

Cultural and Social

Not unlike other sectors where women are in the minority, there are still many cultural and social barriers to women's success in agriculture. Women interviewed still felt they were primarily responsible for childcare and anything related to the domicile. In addition to these responsibilities, many women also had off-farm jobs that made demands on their time. Access to affordable, rural childcare was mentioned in every data gathering method.

Some women mentioned the sexism is still present within the agricultural sector and amongst rural communities, and the judgement they faced for pursuing senior business roles or their own ag-businesses. Often women felt they needed to 'prove' themselves as worthy and capable business women. This was manifested in the pressure they put on themselves to always be exceptional, supremely knowledgeable, and over-prepared before any type of business interaction, something that would not be required of them if they were male. Women also felt they had to walk a fine line between being good, aggressive, and competent businesswomen while not compromising their femininity and rapport in the community. There were also market access examples given from women participants who had particular products to sell, but needed to hire a broker to conduct the sale, because the ethnic culture whom was purchasing them was not accustomed to dealing with a woman for the purchase.

Participation in Policy Discussions and Decision Making

Only half of the survey respondents answered the survey question relating to desire for future involvement and participation in Agriculture policy discussions and decision making opportunities. From those responses, over half of them indicated they would like to participate more in agri-food policy discussions and to participate on agri-food boards. The interview discussions supported there was interest in participation and acknowledged the importance of doing so for their industry, but the confirmed the lack of time due to business and other commitments held them back from getting involved. While the survey indicated women had adequate knowledge on political and policy process, many through the interviews expressed they felt a lack of confidence and appropriate skill sets to feel

comfortable to take an active role in a policy discussion or decision-making. Those however, who have participated on higher level boards, have felt respected because of their experience and qualifications and their opinion valued.

With increased responsibilities, less time and less financial resources, women are unable to fully participate in a variety of activities related to policy development. Women have experienced greater isolation arising from the loss of opportunity to gather face to face, and the concurrent loss of supportive sharing and problem solving, less ability to plan collectively and participate in the decision making and policy development on issues that affect their daily lives, and a sense of betrayal and anger at losing opportunities to affect change that would improve wellbeing of rural communities. (Gerrard and Russell 1999-7-8)

It is of interest to note that while barriers were identified throughout the data collection, of the 92 individuals that responded to the questions of whether they have ever experienced barriers themselves, 58 said no and 34 responded yes. Interviews suggested that those women who began working in agri-food in a supportive and encouraging environment with equal opportunity given by their parents, early on at home as children, were easily accepted and respected as they became more involved in the business, taking on management positions and/or ownership.

Characteristics Unique to Women Ag-Entrepreneurs

There was much discussion throughout the interviews and Focus Groups as to the unique qualities women ag-entrepreneurs possess that differ from men and how those qualities can contribute in different ways to the agri-food industry. The qualities that were consistently described were:

- Women have a strong capacity and talent for relationship building with others (customers, colleagues, family) – they are able to access information and ideas that people possess through formal and informal conversations. Most felt this way because they too have families they must feed and take care of.
- Women were more sensitive and nurturing to their land and their animals. Meat inspectors from across the province noted that in women-run meat operations, the animals were often better taken care of and were in better health.
- Related to point number one, women felt they were better at bringing conversations to a more personal level, rather than strictly the business perspectives of numbers and statistics, strategies and outcomes.

While most people possess these qualities to some degree, it was noted through the interviews and Focus Groups, they are prevalent in women. It was expressed that these are important qualities to differentiate and build on because women can contribute to the agri-food industry in different ways, making it richer, robust, diverse, and more sustainable. The research literature indicates that women often have a much broader vision for agriculture, one that considers the human and environmental dimensions of agriculture in addition to the economic. A different approach and understanding can unlock new opportunities with customers while contributing to regional food development in the province.

- **Priorities**

As earlier noted, while there were some women who felt they had not faced any barriers themselves personally, there was consensus among all either interviews or discussions within the Focus Groups, that there were barriers for women ag-entrepreneurs that needed to be addressed. From the research and feedback provided throughout, the following priorities were identified and supported.

1. Increase confidence through increasing knowledge base, skill development, and better resource and information management
2. Build capacity through mentorship, networking and profiling success stories
3. Encourage and develop capacity and understanding for need to be involved in policy development
4. Offer programming through various delivery methods to rural Alberta in ways and times that try to accommodate the barriers identified that limit participation

- **Recommendations**

Through the many discussions, it was certainly recognized that women's definitions of success were individual and different for each, but the common themes were financial viability and profitability, feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction, achieving a work/life balance, the ability to have equal input into decisions, making decisions and choices with confidence, and being accepted and respected as equal contributors to the agri-food industry.

As determined from the data collected, to overcome the barriers identified, it is important to focus on developing a program that increases access and opportunity to skill development, increases knowledge base, knowledge transfer, expands relationships, increases confidence and capacity within a supportive and open environment, and complementing those characteristics unique to women.

Our recommendations for a program to fulfill the priorities would be:

1. Women's conference open to all women across the agri-food value chain across Alberta, with relevant business topics. Potential model to discuss would be to have technology in place where the keynote speakers broadcast via technology to all five areas, with the balance of speakers defined and presented locally. Potential topics could include:
 - a. Sources of capital to consider
 - b. Conflict resolution and/or negotiation skills
 - c. Communication – How to prepare and pitch a proposal
 - d. Keys to being successful entrepreneur
 - e. Networking – Finding value in any room
 - f. The Impact of Confidence
 - g. Gender Diversity
2. Education components & Business Development Opportunities
 - a. Finance workshops – Basic and advanced depending on business stage

- b. Business Coaches - Speed coaching or Dragon's Den approach as potential methods
 - c. Marketing including Social Media
 - d. Pricing Strategy
 - e. Provide information on how to access resources with success
3. Networking opportunities
 - a. Themed breakfast meetings
 - b. Profiling champions (success stories)
 - c. Information management
4. Mentorship
 - a. Speed mentor
 - b. Structured mentorship
5. Encouraging Policy Development
 - a. Education component on policy process, governance, and the policy environment and how to get involved
6. Participants will work on a specific or issue for their business from the start to the completion of the program to track their progress and to be used as an evaluation for tool both of what they learned and the impact of the program on their business.

Our target market for this project is women working in agri-food who are interested in:

- Building their business management skills and confidence levels through skill development in a open non-intimidating environment
- Learning more about the entire value-chain from other successful women
- Networking with a unique group of women in the industry
- Assisting peers and those just entering into the industry and communicating why it is a great business opportunity
- Making connections among successful women who can help guide them in entrepreneurial decisions
- Developing their business whether they are in the dream stage, start-up or expansion mode

6.0 Summary

The needs assessment is a summary of what we're captured and heard through various data collection methods. It reflects the barriers as identified by a number of women across the province, with the needs defined as a result.

Agri-food has advanced over the years in terms of gender roles, and there is a lot of emphasis currently on improving that further as well as increasing recognition of women's contributions as leaders in the industry. But there is still significant work to be done. To create and develop strong women agri-food business entrepreneurs leaders in rural Alberta, we need to make sure we provide them the learning, networking, and mentorship opportunities they need to compete and grow in a prosperous agri-food businesses as respected entrepreneurs based on the barriers they identified. The intent of *Success for Women in Agri-Food* is to contribute ways to start doing that based on what we've learned, to create a stronger and more vibrant industry with everyone having the equal ability and opportunity to contribute.