

THE WORK OF NORTH DAKOTA FARM AND RANCH WOMEN

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The idea that farming is a partnership between husband and wife has been commonly held by many people (Vanek, 1981). Farm wives have historically played an important role in the development of agriculture in North Dakota (Drache, 1970), and hard work in the fields at planting time in the spring and during harvest in the fall has been a part of many farm women's lives.

The women's movement has played an important part in the change our society has seen in the role of women. Increasingly, women are employed outside their homes. Within the family, women have requested more power and shared responsibility with their husbands in child care. Women's demands for equity have increased in all areas of life. Clearly, women's role has undergone drastic change and, for many women, their work has changed also.

What about North Dakota farm and ranch women? Do they still work alongside their husbands in the farming operation? Are they employed outside their homes? If they do work on the farm or ranch, do they receive a salary for their work? The results of a study to find answers to these and other questions about the lives of farm women are reported in this article.

The Study

Two thousand North Dakota farm families were randomly selected to take part in this study. Questionnaires were mailed, with instructions requesting the woman of the family to complete this questionnaire. Seven hundred and sixty questionnaires were completed and returned. The data were collected during November and December, 1982 and January, 1983.

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Description of the Farm Women

Ninety seven percent of the women in this study were currently married. One percent were widowed, less than 1 percent were divorced or separated and about 1 percent were never married.

The average age of the women was 44 years. They had been married an average of 22 years and had an average of three children. Their annual gross family income averaged \$48,000. Complete statistical description of subjects is available from authors upon request.

The Results

Questionnaires, designed specifically for this project, provided data about the work of the farm and ranch women. They were asked how they would describe their involvement in the operation of the farm or ranch at the present time. The following choices were given, with instructions to check all that applied:

1. No involvement with the operation
2. I do bookkeeping
3. I'm involved in decision making, such as the purchase of machinery or livestock
4. I operate farm or ranch equipment
5. I help care for livestock
6. I prepare meals and/or do laundry for men working on the place
7. Other types of work (please be specific).

The women were asked if they received a salary for the work they did on the farm or ranch. They were also asked if they were currently employed outside the farm or ranch and, if so, the kind of work they did.

Only 7 percent of the women reported they were not involved with the operation of the farm or ranch; 93 percent of the women were involved with the operation (see Table 1). Sixty percent of the women reported doing the bookkeeping for the farm or ranch. Forty two percent said they helped care for the livestock and 54 percent operated equipment.

Seventy six percent prepared meals and/or did the laundry for men working on the place. Involvement in

Table 1. Involvement of Women in Farm/Ranch Operations

Type of Work	N = 760	Percentage
Involved in the Operation		93%
Bookkeeping		60%
Machinery or Livestock Purchasing Decisions		61%
Operate Equipment		54%
Care for Livestock		42%
Prepare Meals and/or Do Laundry for Hired Men		76%
Other Types of Work		22%

decisions about purchases of equipment or livestock was reported by 61 percent of the women.

The majority of women reported doing several types of work. Eighty percent checked two or more of the choices for work involvement. However, the magnitude of the work the women in this study was revealed by their responses to the open-ended "other" type of work question. Twenty two percent specified varied types of work on the "other" question; in addition, they also reported doing several of the tasks that were listed. Following are some examples of their responses:

"We have purebred cattle. I keep records, put up sale posters, make phone calls to promote business, play hostess, prepare lunch on sale day for 200, and serve refreshments after the sale."

"We have laying hens, so am involved with egg delivery to the customers, after they have been gathered, washed, candled and packed."

"I milk 70 cows alone, and feed the calves."

"I run errands, get repairs, make and take telephone calls, take and make radio calls, take meals to the fields, get and take men to the field, get seeds, chemicals, and fertilizer, order fuel, take fuel out to the fields — I do a lot of driving."

Many women reported "helping move equipment when changing fields" and "keeping track of where men are working for other men on the ranch." Also commonly reported was doing "everything else that has to be done."

Twenty seven percent of the women reported they were employed outside the farm or ranch. Their occupations included working as a teacher, nurse, secretary, waitress, salesperson, nurse's aid or postmaster.

Discussion

A profile emerges from the results of this study that portrays North Dakota farm women as being an important part of the farming or ranching operation. The work they do does not seem to be bound by society's idea of "women's work" or "men's work." Operating

equipment and caring for livestock was commonplace, along with preparing meals and doing laundry for men working on the farm or ranch. But perhaps the true appreciation for the work farm and ranch women do can best be summarized by the women who reported that they did "whatever has to be done."

It is interesting to note that, while 93 percent of the women reported being involved with the operation of the farm or ranch, only 7 percent reported they received a salary for the work they did. Whether a woman should receive a salary or not for the work she does is debatable. Considering the amount of work done by these women, it seems reasonable to consider the economic implications. What would happen if suddenly all the work reported by these women was left undone? Certainly the smooth running of the farm or ranch would be affected. A large gap would have to be filled by hired help, demanding a considerable portion of the farm income. On the other hand, one could argue that if farming is a partnership between husband and wife, then no salary should be paid to the wife.

It appears that the general trend of women's employment outside the home is present in rural America, too. Over one-fourth of the farm women reported being employed away from the farm or ranch, far less than the national figure of 51 percent. Yet, this represents a significant number of the farm women when one considers that traditionally, farm women did not hold jobs off the farm. These women seemed to do work for the farm or ranch in addition to their outside employment. Moreover, while the number of miles they had to travel was not determined, it can be assumed that some women had to travel considerable distances requiring more hours away from the operation. A possible explanation for the employment of women in this study might logically be financial necessity. 1982 was a difficult year for farmers and ranchers; perhaps the women sought employment in order to help with finances.

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that North Dakota women continue to play an important role in farming and ranching. The magnitude of their work suggests that they can handle a diversity of tasks requiring strength and skill. Perhaps, unlike the general confusion regarding the appropriate role for women in society, these farm and ranch women "do whatever has to be done" without worrying about it being men's work or women's work. This conclusion leads one to wonder if farm and ranch men also disregard society's idea of work that is appropriate for the different sexes. Do they, for instance, do typical "women's work" i.e., child care, household tasks and meal preparation? or do the men, unlike the women, adhere to the traditional division of labor?

REFERENCES

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2. Vanek, K. "Roles of Women on Farms," *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 1981, 32, 1, 11-20.