

# THE ISOLATED LIFE OF NORTH DAKOTA FARM AND RANCH WOMEN: MYTH OR REALITY?

Harriett Light, Doris Hertsgaard, and Richard Hanson

A study to gather information about the current life of North Dakota farm women was conducted during 1982-1983. The overall goal of the project was to produce an accurate picture of the life of farm women today. A random sample of 2000 farm and ranch women was asked to respond to questions about their church attendance, family contacts and social activities.

The image of life for women on North Dakota farms and ranches as one of isolation with few if any social activities is commonly held by many people. Such an idea may have originated many years ago when transportation was relatively poor or when the tasks of daily family and farm care left little time for social activities. However, church attendance has always played an important part of the lives of North Dakotans. History books give vivid accounts of the high priority pioneers gave to building churches on the prairie. In addition to meeting the spiritual needs of people, it appeared the churches served a socializing function as well (Drache, 1970; Robinson, 1966; Stratton, 1981).

## The Subjects

The women who participated in this study were randomly selected. Two thousand questionnaires, designed specifically for this study, were mailed during 1982 and 1982. Seven hundred and sixty questionnaires were returned with usable data.

Ninety-seven percent of the women were currently married. Their average age 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 the subjects is available upon request from the authors.

## The Results and Discussion

**Marital Status.** Less than 1 percent of the women in this study were currently divorced or separated from

their husband. Four percent had been divorced but had remarried. It is obvious that the divorce rate of North Dakota farm and ranch women who participated in this study was very low. In North Dakota, according to the 1980 Census data, a 150 percent increase in the number of divorces occurred during the last decade. According to this study, the significant increase in North Dakota divorces did not occur among farm and ranch families.

**Church Attendance.** Sixty-two percent of the women reported they attended religious services once a week. Twenty percent reported they attended services two or three times a month, 5 percent attended once a month, 8 percent attended several times a year, 3 percent attended once a year and only 1 percent reported they never attended religious services.

Apparently, the women in this study value church attendance. While this project did not determine the meaning of church attendance for the women, it is likely that a need for socializing and visiting might be fulfilled, in addition to the need for worship and spiritual fulfillment.

**Visiting with Neighbors.** Only 3 percent of the women reported they had no contact with their neighbors. Four percent reported they visited only about once a year. Nineteen percent reported visiting with neighbors several times a year. Once a month visiting was reported by 25 percent. The rest of the women (47.5 percent) reported visiting weekly or daily with their neighbors.

Obviously, neighbors play an important part in the lives of farm women. While the quality of the visit was not determined, it is likely that the visiting with neighbors was enjoyable, at least for the women who had weekly or daily contact.

**Visiting with Friends.** Visiting with friends who do not live "close by" was not as frequent for the farm women as was visiting with neighbors. Five percent reported they never visited friends and 39 percent said they visited their friends only once a year. Thirty-eight percent visited their friends only once a month and 15 percent visited once or twice a week. Only 2 percent visited friends every day.

It is possible that several factors might make visiting friends more difficult than visiting neighbors. Distance

---

*Light is professor and Hanson is assistant professor, Child Development and Family Relations, and Hertsgaard is professor, Mathematical Science.*

---

and time away from farm and ranch may be a problem. Also, it is likely that one would see neighbors in town or church. In other words, circumstances make contact with neighbors more likely and easier to manage than contact with friends.

**Visiting with Relatives.** The women in this study reported more frequent visiting with relatives than with neighbors or friends. Sixty-five percent visited relatives at least once a week; 24 percent visited every day. Twenty-one percent visited relatives once a month, 12 percent several times a year and 3 percent once a year. Only one woman reported she never visited her relatives.

Apparently, the family ties of North Dakota farm women are strong. The contact with relatives would help family togetherness as well as provide a source of support to the women.

A social trend in our nation over the past few decades has been increased mobility. This has had a significant impact on young families who frequently reside in areas where they have no relatives. Consequently, they have limited support and assistance at critical times in their lives; the birth of a baby, for example. For older people, living far away from their family can be lonely and even frightening. The family can be a source of comfort, strength and support. The majority of women in this study have that advantage. While this study did not assess the quality of family support, it is likely that support to members was present, given the frequency of contact with relatives.

**Club and Organization Membership.** The large majority of women (90 percent) belonged to at least one club or organization and many women belonged to more than one. Twenty-four percent belonged to two groups, 21 percent belonged to three groups and 10 percent belonged to four clubs or organizations. Eleven percent belonged to five or more groups.

Eighty-one percent of the women reported they attended meetings of the clubs and organizations on a

regular basis. Only 11 percent said they did not attend regularly and 7 percent said they never attended the meetings.

The high level of participation by farm women in clubs and organizations is noteworthy. Membership in clubs and organizations can offer a sense of belonging and support to people. The meetings can provide a source of companionship and fellowship. Perhaps more important, membership can help guard against feelings of isolation and rejection. Therefore, the farm women in this study can be assumed to have, at the least, opportunities for the positive benefits of group membership and, ideally, actually derive psychological support from their active participation.

## Conclusions

Based on the results of this study of 760 randomly selected farm and ranch women, the idea of the social isolation of North Dakota farm and ranch women is a myth. This study portrays these women as active in clubs, organizations and churches. In addition, visiting with neighbors was frequent, further dispelling the myth of isolation.

Family contacts were also frequent for the farm and ranch women, and the rate of divorce was very low compared with North Dakota in general.

In summary, there appears to be a social and family network that actively exists for North Dakota farm and ranch women. Based on the results of this study, only a very small minority of women could be described as isolated from social contacts.

## REFERENCES

1. **Drache, H. The Challenge of the Prairie.** Fargo, ND: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1970.
2. **Robinson, E. History of North Dakota.** Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966.
3. **Stratton, J. Pioneer Women.** New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981.