

North Dakota Farm Women and Their Roles in the Family: Are They Changing?

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One of the most significant social changes of the 20th century has been the increased numbers of women entering the paid labor force. Prior to 1940, slightly less than one in four women were gainfully employed in the United States. By 1980, over half of all American women aged 16 and over were in the labor force (Blau and Ferber, 1986). This dramatic shift can be attributed to the increased participation of married women, which rose from 17 percent in 1910 to 51 percent in 1980 (Mammen, Rathge and Whan, 1986).

Farm women, in recent years, have also been a part of this social change. Traditionally, the responsibility of the farm wife has been to participate in unpaid farm work to varying degrees, and there is evidence that when husbands take off-farm work, wives increase their farm hours (Meiners and Olson, 1987; Tigges and Rosenfeld, 1987). The increasing dependency of farm families on non-farm earnings has resulted in over one-third of all farm wives being employed off the farm (Acock and Deseren, 1986). In fact, the labor force participation rates for farm women have quadrupled in the past 50 years while employment levels of nonfarm women have doubled (Meiners and Olson, 1987).

In 1984, 55.1 percent of North Dakota women (over age 16) were in the civilian labor force and 52.5 percent were actively employed (Statistical Abstract, 1985). City-by-city trends within the state reflect the population impact of the dwindling energy economy: the percentage of women in the labor force has increased while the actual number has declined in oil-dependent areas of the state.

In recent years, off-farm income of farm wives has become even more important to the farm family's economic well-being. Theoretically, increased economic contribution by wives should also change gender roles, creating an equitable division of labor within the household as well as providing women with greater input into household decision-making. However, the authors hypothesize that few, if any, changes in gender roles have occurred due to women's economic contribution and fewer changes yet in the case of farm families.

The objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To assess the relative contributions of husbands and wives on a variety of household and farm tasks.
2. To determine whether off-farm employed and non-employed wives differ in their contributions to household and farm labor.
3. To determine whether the husbands of off-farm employed wives assume greater responsibility for household and childcare than husbands of non-employed farm wives.

IMPACT OF WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT ON THE HOUSEHOLD

Women's employment has had economic as well as non-economic impact on the household. Adjustments in the household made by husbands and wives due to the wives' employment affect overall family dynamics.

Impact on Family Decision-Making

While in most cases a working wife contributes less than 50 percent of the family's total income, this contribution allows the family greater purchasing power, a higher level of living and a feeling of greater financial security. The woman's productive ability in the labor force generally provides her with greater input into family decision-making (Spitz, 1988). Employed women are more likely to have a voice in household decisions which deal with allocation of capital, both human capital (for example, decisions on timing and amount of labor force participation of family members) and nonhuman capital (for example, financial decisions dealing with consumption, expenditures, savings and investments).

Impact on Allocation of Household Tasks

Household work still remains the woman's domain, regardless of her labor force participation status. Even with the advent of many time and labor-saving household devices, the amount of time spent in household work has not changed considerably over the last 60 years. Women may be spending less time per day on household tasks such as dishwashing and laundry, but more time caring for family members. Any decrease in time spent in total household work by women over the past 60 years may be attributed to the smaller families of today (Bryant, 1987; Blau and Ferber, 1986).

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Non-employed wives devote as much time to housework as their mothers and grandmothers. And for the working woman who has at least two jobs, one outside the home and one inside the home, the work-day is most likely longer for her than it was for her grandmother (Bryant, 1981; Sanik, 1981; Vanek, 1974; Walker, 1973).

While the majority of both men and women agree that men should increase their share of the housework and child-caring roles just as women have increased their share of the labor force role, men's actual domestic behavior has been slow to change. Husbands still spend little time in housework, regardless of their wives' labor force status (Berardo, Shehan and Leslie, 1987; Rexroat and Shehan, 1987). When men contribute household service, it is mostly in the area of child care (Blau and Ferber, 1986). In a recent survey of 5,000 households, husbands of working wives were only slightly more involved than husbands of non-working wives in performing household tasks. When men performed household tasks, very few participated with any degree of regularity. Men under 35 were only slightly more likely to perform household tasks than older men (Feinberg, 1987).

Impact on Lifestyle Satisfaction

Lifestyle satisfaction between husbands and wives was measured in a recent study of farm couples with wives employed off the farm. When women take off-farm jobs, they may be adding responsibilities to their existing domestic and farm duties. In addition, if husbands are perceived as not sharing household tasks and parenting duties, additional role strain may be experienced by wives, leading to reduced lifestyle satisfaction (Knaub, Draughn, Wozniak, Little, Smith and Weeks, 1988). The number of roles in which a farm wife participates also negatively affects her lifestyle satisfaction but not her marital satisfaction (Draughn, et al., 1988).

Findings from a recent study of 527 farm couples suggest that at this time women's off-farm employment may prove disruptive to traditional farm values. High-quality marital relationships were possibly hindered, especially in the situations where the couple was new to farming (i.e. the farm wife had farmed less than 10 years) (Little, et al., 1988).

Impact on Gender Roles Within the Family

Societal attitudes toward working women have changed. We no longer question if women should go to college, become labor force participants, earn an independent income, choose to remain single, and/or choose to remain childless. In fact, we now think of women's employment as having created more opportunities and therefore more equality for women. What has not changed, however, is gender roles within the family as measured by the division of labor within the household. Women are still expected to nurture and care for the family, prepare meals and perform all tasks associated with housekeeping. It is outside the home that any degree of equality in terms of gender roles has been attained. If equality has not been achieved within the household, gender roles have truly not changed (Blau and Ferber, 1986).

Impact on Farm Women's Roles

Farm women differ significantly from their urban counterparts in that they usually have a minimum of two work roles without participating in the labor force. They are primarily responsible for household management yet also participate

in farm labor, to varying degrees. There are two additional roles for farm wives which are not always recognized — that of marital partner and parent. When the additional role of off-farm employee is added to these roles, role overload can be expected unless the wife's additional responsibilities are balanced out with a combination of increased emotional and physical support. Women who work off the farm have been found to decrease their involvement in the farm operation, thus possibly adding to the workload of other family members involved in the farm labor system (Little et al., 1988).

In a study of farm wives in seven states, the participation in various roles (homemaker, farm worker, off-farm employed worker, marital partner and parent) was surveyed. Thirteen percent of the 1,235 respondents reported functioning in five roles, 37 percent in four roles, 42 in three roles and 8 percent in only two roles. More likely to carry on multiple roles to a greater degree are younger wives, more educated wives and those from smaller farms. A negative relationship was found to exist between the number of roles of a farm wife and her lifestyle satisfaction. Role strain was found to be related to the number of roles performed and to being employed off the farm (Draughn et al., 1988).

SURVEY OF FARM FAMILIES

The data presented here are taken from a three-year study on North Dakota farm families, Household Consumption and Financial Management Behavioral Survey, 1986-88. The original sample, which was randomly drawn, was sent a mailed questionnaire. For purposes of this paper, a random sample of farm families from the 1987 and 1988 surveys were analyzed. The 1987 and 1988 samples were combined, as T-tests for mean differences did not indicate any significant differences. The sample was divided into off-farm employed wife families (about one-third: 29 percent) and non off-farm employed wife families (about two-thirds: 71 percent).

Sample and Methods

The median age of the employed wives was 36 years while that of nonemployed wives was 46 years. The median educational level of employed wives was 13.7 years, that of nonemployed wives was 12.5 years. Among the employed wives, approximately two-thirds of them had some college training and 27 percent had a college degree. Employed wives had slightly larger families (3.7 family members); nonemployed wives had 3.4 family members. The family income of employed wife families was lower (\$20,000-\$24,999), while that of nonemployed wife families was \$30,000-\$34,999. The overwhelming number of employed farm women (93.5 percent) participated in the labor force to supplement family income. On the whole, off-farm employed wives tend to be younger, better-educated, have a larger household size, and have less family income.

The authors assessed the relative contribution of husbands and wives to a variety of household and farm tasks. The respondents were asked, "Indicate who does these tasks and the frequency with which they do them." The household tasks were: meal preparation and cleanup; house and clothing care; child care; care of other family members; marketing; yard care; car care; household management; and attending parent/teacher conferences. The farm tasks identified in the survey were: operating tillage equipment; livestock care; operating other farm equipment; marketing grain and livestock; delivering food to the workers; buying farm equipment; farm bookkeeping; going to

town for parts; and making farm financial decisions. The possible responses were (1) all the time, (2) some of the time, and (3) none of the time.

Results

As shown in Table 1, the results indicate that in general, regardless of their employment status, women perform the majority of household tasks all the time. However, wives and husbands share equally in yard care. The only household task for which men appear to take the majority of the responsibility is car care.

Few differences emerged in the household contribution between employed farm wives and nonemployed farm wives. Employed wives were responsible for car care more of the time while nonemployed wives appeared to be more involved in family care and household management. The majority (85 percent) of the employed wives were responsible for child care either some of all of the time or all of the time whereas 29 percent of the nonemployed wives were not engaged in child care any of the time. This difference is most likely due to the larger number of "empty nesters" found among the nonemployed wives.

Child care was the only task in which the husbands of employed wives were more likely to be engaged, compared to husbands of nonemployed wives. The results also show that a larger percentage of husbands of employed wives help with meal preparation and clean-up at least some of the time.

Labor force participation did not seem to make much difference in the case of farm tasks; both employed as well as nonemployed wives were equally involved in farm work (see Table 2). Some of the more common areas of regular assistance were in farm tasks that did not require the use of heavy machinery such as farm decision-making, bookkeeping, and running a variety of farm errands.

The employed farm wives were more involved than their nonemployed counterparts in farm tasks such as planting, harvesting, and livestock care. As compared to the husbands of nonemployed wives, the husbands of employed wives were more likely to operate equipment and market grain and livestock all the time.

Discussion and Implications

Analysis of the data indicates that household work is still the primary domain of the farm wife. Traditional household tasks such as house care and management, meal preparation and clothing care are overwhelmingly done by farm wives regardless of their labor force status. The only household task where farm husbands spend time of any significance is in the area of child care, a task which is qualitatively different than other chores due to the strong social component of the activity.

Farm women continue to spend their time in multiple jobs, one for which they are paid a market wage and others for which they are not paid. In addition to the time spent in off-farm employment, farm wives spend additional hours

Table 1. Employment status and division of household labor (1987 and 1988). N = 265.

Household Tasks	Employment Status of Wife	Male Householder			Female Householder		
		All the Time	Some of Time	None of Time	All the Time	Some of Time	None of Time
----- percent -----							
Meal prep/cleanup	Emp	1.32	54.97	43.71	63.35	33.54	3.11
	Nonemp	4.83	42.90	47.13	68.92	22.70	8.38
House/clothing care	Emp	.67	38.92	60.40	69.57	27.95	2.48
	Nonemp	9.04	20.48	67.47	76.09	14.13	9.78
Child care	Emp	4.29	68.57	27.14	42.25	42.25	15.49
	Nonemp	5.56	42.36	52.08	44.81	25.97	29.22
Other family care	Emp	12.00	44.00	44.00	31.17	42.86	25.97
	Nonemp	7.75	32.39	59.86	37.01	30.52	32.47
Marketing	Emp	14.29	49.35	36.36	55.84	37.66	6.49
	Nonemp	24.12	38.82	37.06	53.93	30.34	14.73
Yard care	Emp	11.25	65.00	23.75	35.90	60.26	3.85
	Nonemp	20.00	57.22	22.78	24.72	55.06	20.22
Car care	Emp	40.74	54.32	4.94	3.80	73.42	22.78
	Nonemp	54.05	34.49	11.35	14.79	45.56	39.64
Household management	Emp	6.41	60.26	33.33	50.00	48.75	1.25
	Nonemp	14.46	44.58	40.96	58.70	34.24	7.07
Parent/teacher conferences	Emp	12.50	46.63	41.07	56.06	30.30	13.64
	Nonemp	20.41	36.76	41.84	54.13	27.52	18.35

every week participating in household, family and farm tasks. This is particularly true for the younger farm wife, who is more likely to have young children and participate in the labor force. In addition, younger farm wives are also likely to take a more active role in farm labor, especially when child care demands decrease.

Farm women face a demanding work day--one which allows for little leisure time and relaxation. It is not surprising that the combination of activities plus the diversity in role functioning can lead to stress. Women with multi-role commitments and those with young children could benefit greatly from increased physical and emotional support from their husbands and other family members.

Although gender role expectations continue to evolve regarding men's and women's roles in the paid labor force, changes on the farm and in the home are lagging behind. Discrepancy between employment and family expectations may have a significant impact on lifestyle satisfaction because women will come to expect egalitarianism on the farm. These complex relationships need to be studied further as significant role changes will be demanded for both men and women.

CONCLUSION

Farm women have taken the meaning of the popular expression "superwoman" to new heights. The number of roles an average farm wife assumes is always greater than

her urban counterpart. When the additional role of off-farm laborer is added to her existing roles, her personal life, the marital relationship and family dynamics are all affected to varying degrees.

There is particular concern here for the younger wife. She is more likely to be employed off the farm, have child care responsibilities and participate in farm labor, yet the family tends to have a lower income. Therefore the potential for stress is extremely high. Stress in turn could have a negative impact on interpersonal and family relations.

Just as American women on the whole have increased their labor force participation, it is certain that the farm wife will also continue to enter the paid labor force in unprecedented numbers. Family economists, extension agents, mental health professionals and others dealing with farm families should be prepared to provide assistance in dealing with financial and personal management issues that are specific to this audience.

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Table 2. Employment status and division of farm labor (1987 and 1988). N = 265.

Farm Tasks	Employment Status of Wife	Male Householder			Female Householder		
		All the Time	Some of Time	None of Time	All the Time	Some of Time	None of Time
----- percent -----							
Operation tillage equipment	Emp	83.75	13.75	2.50	1.39	30.56	68.06
	Nonemp	73.71	16.49	9.79	3.29	22.37	74.34
Livestock care	Emp	50.00	18.42	31.48	4.29	37.14	58.57
	Nonemp	49.70	13.02	37.28	6.08	22.30	71.62
Operate equipment	Emp	90.00	7.50	2.50	4.23	40.85	54.93
	Nonemp	74.07	17.99	7.94	5.73	29.30	64.97
Marketing grain/stock	Emp	81.01	13.92	5.06	1.43	38.57	60.00
	Nonemp	67.55	20.74	11.70	3.29	36.84	59.87
Deliver food to farmer	Emp	8.22	24.66	67.12	36.36	41.56	22.08
	Nonemp	11.41	21.48	67.11	36.63	40.70	22.67
Buy farm equipment	Emp	77.50	16.25	6.25	16.44	54.79	28.77
	Nonemp	75.39	14.66	9.95	18.29	46.34	35.37
Farm bookkeeping	Emp	56.96	27.85	15.19	36.00	30.67	33.33
	Nonemp	54.14	23.76	22.10	39.64	27.81	32.54
To town for parts	Emp	33.75	63.75	2.50	1.28	87.18	11.54
	Nonemp	39.89	50.53	9.57	14.36	67.96	17.68
Farm financial decisions	Emp	75.00	21.25	3.75	32.43	48.65	18.92
	Nonemp	67.02	22.51	10.47	30.41	51.46	18.13

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