



Women in Production Agriculture: A Hidden Audience in your County?

Challenge to Extension

Various sources suggest that more farm women in the United States take on heavy duty chores related to production agriculture than previously realized. Consequently, there may be a greater need for farm women to participate in extension programs in production agriculture. The question facing extension educators: how can I determine the extent to which farm women in my county perform *farm labor*?

Farm women fall into two groups. One group consists of Principal Operators of farms. A Principal Operator is that person from the farm designated to provide information about the farm in a U.S. census interview. Although male Principal Operators of farms continue to decrease across the country, the number of female Principal Operators of farms continues to *increase* (Oliveira and Cox, 1989). Since 1997, there has been an increase of 13%. Women make up 11% of all Primary Farm Operators and 27% of all farm Operators (*2002 Census of Agriculture*). Between 1997 and 2002, Pennsylvania lost 2,000 farms but gained 1,000 woman-led farms. However, women who are Principal Operators are only some of the farm women.

The second group comprises the largest segment of farm women: the spouses of Principal Operators. Since labor on farms performed by spouses of principal operators is not documented in the Census, there is unfortunately, no official record of farm labor performed by this second group of farm women nationwide. The census interview collects information and reports on only the farm labor for one person, the person interviewed, *even if there are other legal partners on the farm such as a wife*.

Without an official tally, how do we know then, that women are involved in farm labor? Three sources reveal their work: indirect indicators from accident data, direct measures from recent studies and indicators from women themselves.

Indirect Indicators from Accident Data

Farm injury data reveal that women perform a wide array of farm labor (Lee, 1992).

- Data about farm wives and daughters 15 years of age or older across thirty-one states demonstrate from the kind of injury that they have sustained, that many of these women work in grain and dairy operations (NSC, 1982).
- Data about farm women over a two-year period in central Wisconsin demonstrate, from some of the injuries they received, that they work with animals and in barns (Stueland, Lee, and Layde, 1991).
- Data about farm women over a three-year period in Minnesota, reveal that severe trauma and death they encounter comes from being hit or crushed by tractors or other farm vehicles directly, or by such vehicles rolling over (Gunderson, et al., 1990).



- Data about women in Kentucky and Wisconsin, that they die from farm fatalities (Stallones, 1990; Gerberich et al. 1991).
- Data about women in seven states reveal that women who are not employed off-farm spend an average of 21.8 hours per week on agricultural tasks and those who do work off-farm spend 14.1 hours (Goodwin et al., 1991). In a national study, a greater percentage of women reported participating in farm labor tasks in 2001 than in 1980 (Willits and Jolly, 2002).

Direct Measures from Studies

Asking families directly, who does what kind of work on the farm, provides compelling evidence that farm women participate in a range of agricultural tasks on the farm. Data from Minnesota farm businesses (Danes, 1997), support similar trends in the late eighties and early nineties (Danes, 1996):

Table 1. Percent of Farm Wives Who Perform Specific Farm Tasks (N=345).

Farm Labor: Tasks	% of Wives Performing Task
Care for farm animals	75%
Harvest crops	70%
Do fieldwork without machinery	65%
Plow, disk, plant	48%
Purchase major farm supplies	43%
Supervise family members	43%
Market products	27%
Apply fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides	15%

The Minnesota study also revealed that wives who do not work off-farm are twice as likely as wives who do, to harvest crops, care for farm animals, and market products (Danes, 1997).

Other Indicators from Women Themselves

Over a thousand women met at the Second International Conference on Women in Agriculture in Washington, D.C. in June, 1998. The conference was sponsored by USDA and the President's Interagency Council on Women. About 400 women from across the United States, including Pennsylvania, represented different segments of agriculture ranging from growing seeds for export to harvesting and marketing crops and animals for domestic consumption. What happened at the conference, having these women share their best practices in farming and learning from one another, demonstrated that women are highly involved in production agriculture.

In Your County

The question facing extension educators? How can you find out the extent to which farm women in your county perform farm labor so these women can

- benefit from attending your **extension programs**
- be a candidate for your **advisory committee**
- be a **panelist** at your program
- contribute to a **needs assessment**.



Tips for finding out the extent to which farm women in your area perform farm labor:

- Ask. Interview farm women themselves, their children at 4-H, their significant others, veterinarians, feed suppliers, milk tank drivers, bankers, physicians, and others who periodically visit farms.
- Ask about different tasks at appropriate times of the year so data on seasonal tasks are more reliable.
- Turn to the list of tasks that Danes compiled to begin your list so you have those details in your mind (see Table 1 above). Brainstorm a list of tasks you know the men do on farms in your county, as a basis for the list for women.
- Be aware that many farm women themselves don't think of their work as 'farm labor' and they may even deny they do any, at first. Many farm women who perform farm labor do not think of themselves as being a farmer or partner in the business because the work of most farm women is not officially recognized (Clayton, 1998). Indeed, as revealed at the Conference on Women in Agriculture, many farm wives when first asked, "What do you do?" will answer, "I'm a farm wife," not "I'm a dairy farmer" or "I'm a producer."
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Start with a general open-ended question, something like

"In the past month, how have you taken care of (or worked with) the animals on your farm?"

"In the past month, how have you worked in the fields? or with crops or vegetables?"

Probe for the type of animal or crop and how often the work is done (regularly or in emergencies). Most importantly, have her describe what she does so that you have information to decide if this farm woman is a potential participant for one of your future programs. Be direct and say something like:

"Explain how you worked with the heifers over the course of last week."

"Discuss what you, yourself, harvested in the past month."

If details are not given, ask

- ***length of time?***
- ***time of day or night?***
- ***crops involved?***
- ***who else helped, if anyone?***

"Talk about what you, yourself, planted this spring on the farm and the difficulties you came across."

These open-ended questions will provide you with data on the range of agricultural tasks that women perform. An excellent reference for developing open-ended questions is *Listen to the People* by Lawrence F. Salmen, 1989 (#HC185.E44S25 in Pattee Library). Also consult [Tipsheet #69 Using Standard Phrases in Qualitative Interviews](#).

- Use different forums in your county to informally ask these questions. Look for opportunities to speak to a group of farm women, advisory committees, or hired labor. This is called *purposive* sampling.



- Get an array of ideas about what women do on the farms in your county, and then conduct a systematic survey to substantiate or determine what appears to be key findings. The list you compile through informal discussion can be the core of your systematic survey.

For each of the tasks you list in the survey, provide answer categories used in a national study (Willits and Jolly, 2002):

- 1 YOUR REGULAR DUTY
- 2 SOMETHING YOU DO OCCASIONALLY
- 3 SOMETHING YOU NEVER DO

Conclusion

Indirect indicators, direct measures from recent studies, and direct testimony from farm women in the United States suggest that farm women are deeply involved in production agriculture. This group may be a hidden audience for extension in your county. Find out by making it a point to seek out farm women and other members of the agricultural community and ask them the questions above. Print off this Tipsheet, cut out the yellow section on asking questions, and paste it into your day planner for quick reference.

WAgN

The Women's Agricultural Network is a group of producers and College of Agricultural Sciences researchers and educators who work together to bring educational programs to Pennsylvania farm women. If you are interested in receiving their monthly newsletter or in getting involved, go to <http://wagn.cas.psu.edu/>.

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Additional Resources

[Tipsheet #78: Are You Reaching New Agricultural Audiences?](#)

[PA Example #23: A Needs Assessment Strategy for Women in Agriculture](#)

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