

is agricultural extension for women?

Jere Lee Gilles

Do women play an important role in agricultural production in this country? Is their contribution recognized by the agricultural establishment? Yes and no.

In recent years, more attention has been given to the role of women. For example, major farm magazines such as the *Farm Journal* and *Successful Farming* have begun regular features aimed at a female audience. Also, highly successful agricultural Extension programs for women have been developed in Wisconsin, Missouri, and several other states. But, in spite of this increased interest in women's issues and the success of these programs, only 14 states have developed agricultural Extension programs for women. In 1980, only 6 states had educational programs in agricultural production designed to meet the needs of farm women. Thirteen states had programs in record keeping or estate planning where farm women or husband/wife teams were the major audience.¹

The development of programs for women is a new frontier for agricultural Extension. As with most frontiers, it offers tremendous opportunities to increase agricultural production and to improve the quality of rural life. . . .

Such programs are relatively new. Extension professionals and administrators are often reluctant to develop agricultural programs for a new audience when funding for traditional agricultural Extension activities are limited. As a result, people who advocate agricultural programs for women may be discouraged. The importance of such programs may be seriously questioned and agricultural education for women may not be given high priority. Lack of information about the activities of farm women may be one barrier to the development of these programs.

Jere Lee Gilles: Assistant Professor, Department of Rural Sociology, College of Agriculture, University of Missouri—Columbia. Accepted for publication: November, 1981.

Common Questions

The following discussion focuses on several common questions concerning the development of agricultural Extension programs for women.

Sufficiently Involved?

Question # 1: Are women sufficiently involved in agriculture to warrant special programs? Yes, research indicates that about 50% of farm women are regularly involved in agricultural production activities. Many of the remaining 50% keep farm records and participate occasionally in production activities. In areas where family farms predominate, farm wives are a more important source of farm labor than are hired workers.² Yet in spite of this fact, Extension programs for hired agricultural labor are more common than programs for women.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies indicate that the participation of women in agricultural production is increasing.³ Farm women in most states represent a large, unserved audience for agricultural Extension.

Adequately Served?

Question # 2: Do present agricultural Extension programs adequately serve women? No, most don't. While women are free to attend agricultural Extension programs and field days, attendance is predominately male. Similarly, home economics programs tend to have female participants. Part of this pattern may be due to local traditions and customs. Agricultural Extension programs tend to be oriented toward the male farm operator rather than to other members of the farm family. This orientation discourages female participation.

In addition, most farm women aren't farm operators or managers, but share responsibilities with their spouses. These women may have different educational needs than those of farm operators. Large numbers of farm women grew up in towns or cities or on farms that produced different commodities than their present ones. Farm women over 30 years old may never have been given an opportunity to receive a formal agricultural education.⁴

Because the background of many farm women is different from that of male farm operators, they may be reluctant to participate in Extension programs designed for male farmers unless special efforts are made to recruit them. In some cases, the educational needs of farm women differ from those of the majority of farm operators, and programs must be adapted to their needs and experiences.

While in many cases men and women may have the same Extension needs, women may be interested in different types of Extension programs than are men. Missouri's farrowing schools are an example. While the program would be of use

to men, women have been much more interested in the topic. Female interest in this program has been so great that it has become a "feminine farrowing school." The program has been so successful that the Missouri Pork Growers Association has taken over major responsibility for its operation.

*Violate
Legislation?*

Question # 3: Does the design of agricultural Extension programs for women violate civil rights legislation? No. In most states, home economics Extension programs are oriented toward the needs of female homemakers and agricultural Extension programs oriented toward those of male farm operators. These programs aren't considered discriminatory because males and females are free to participate in both programs even though they have a predominately female or male clientele.

An agricultural Extension program open to the public but designed to meet the needs of women is no more an example of sex discrimination than in a 4-H program an example of age discrimination. If anything, a concern for affirmative action should motivate states to develop agricultural programs for women. Such programs would mitigate the effects of past practices that discouraged female participation in agricultural training programs—for example, the Future Farmers of America before the late 1960s. Civil rights legislation is, therefore, no barrier to the creation of agricultural Extension programs for women.

Principles for Female-Oriented Ag Programs

Although it's clear that more attention should be given to farm women by agricultural Extension professionals, there are few guidelines available for developing such programs. However, an examination of current programs and research in this area can give us some guidance. For example, we know what types of farms have the most female involvement and the types of programs that have been most successful in the past.⁵ Women are most actively involved in agricultural production in farms that combine crop and livestock production than on specialized enterprises. Women are less likely to be involved in agriculture on very small farms or on farms that have a large hired labor force.

To date the most successful Extension programs for women have been in areas where moderately sized, diversified farms are common. Short courses in animal husbandry, farm management, and financial planning have been most successful. The exact type of program required will vary from one region to another. In some areas, short courses on equipment operation may be popular.

A person interested in identifying the Extension needs of farm women can receive considerable help from women's farm organizations. Such organizations as WIFE (Women Involved in Farm Economics) and the women's auxiliaries of farm and commodity organizations can help design programs and organize meetings and short courses. Many women active in these organizations have a strong commitment to production agriculture and may presently have little direct contact with Extension programs. Their involvement would increase the effectiveness of any educational program.

Finally, women might participate more in current agricultural Extension programs if the traditional male image of such activities were diminished. One of the best ways to change this image would be for state Extension Services to actively recruit female agricultural science graduates.

Summary

The development of programs for women is a new frontier for agricultural Extension. As with most frontiers, it offers tremendous opportunities to increase agricultural production and to improve the quality of rural life. This program can be achieved most effectively by improving the productivity of an important part of the farm labor force—women.

Footnotes

1. This information is a result of a survey of state Extension directors and administrators of 1890 Extension programs.
2. For an introduction to the role of women in agricultural production, see the following: Peter Dorner and Mark Marquandt, "Economic Changes on a Sample of Wisconsin Farms—1950-1975" (Madison, Wisconsin: Agricultural Economics Staff Paper Series No. 135, 1977); Jere L. Gilles, "Big Sky Agriculture: A Study of the Social Organization of Agriculture in Two Montana Communities" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1978); Seena Kohl, *Working Together: Women and Family in Southern Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976); and Barbara J. Sawers, "Predictors of a Farm Wife's Involvement in General Management and Adoption Decisions," *Rural Sociology*, XXXIX (Winter, 1973), 412-26.
3. Dorner and Marquandt, "Economic Changes on a Sample of Wisconsin Farms."
4. Kohl, *Working Together* and Linda Locke, "The Role of Women in Agriculture—The Case of the Feminine Farrowing School" (Master's thesis, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1981).
5. Linda Locke, "The Role of Women in Agriculture"; Eugene Wilkening and Nancy Ahrens, "Involvement of Wives in Farm Tasks, as Related to the Characteristics of the Farm, the Family, and Work of the Farm" (Paper presented at the meetings of the Rural Sociology Society, Burlington, Vermont, 1979); and Jere L. Gilles, "Big Sky Agriculture."