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FARM WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE FARM

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It always has been acknowledged that farm women make substantial contributions to the farm, but until recently little has been done to quantify and document the value of those contributions. Even, today, relatively few data exist.

The wives of farmers, like most homemakers, carry the major responsibility for housework and care of children.

This newsletter, without diminishing the value of homemaking, focuses on the monetary contributions of farm women over and above the usual household tasks. Three areas are discussed: 1) women as farm operators, 2) women as farm laborers, and 3) farm women in off-farm employment.

Nationwide in 1978, five percent of U.S. farms were solely or principally operated by women. In South Dakota, that figure was 2.8 percent. This involves about 1,100 of the State's farms. Most female farm operators run small farms averaging about 285 acres in size. About 170 of the 1,100 farms operated by women in South Dakota had sales of less than \$2,500 in 1978. About 80% of the female operators are full-owners, which is a higher proportion than that for male operators. Women are more likely than men to operate small livestock farms.

Apart from serving as farm operators, a large number of farm women work as unpaid family labor on their farms. In a 1980, study many women were found

to participate in a wide range of tasks on their own farm, including book-keeping, running errands, caring for farm animals, and helping with harvest. This study did not place a monetary value on the unpaid family labor provided by women.

An indirect way of trying to value unpaid family labor is to examine it in relation to the cost of hired farm labor. The 1978 Census of Agriculture indicates that over 16,000 South Dakota farms employed hired farm labor—part-time, full-time, or both. The average cost per farm was approximately \$3,400. For those farms employing workers more than 150 days per year, the average cost was \$6,300. If unpaid family labor by women were assumed to take the place of work that otherwise would be done by hired farm workers, we could conclude that each farm woman contributes at least \$3,400, and most likely more, of value to individual farm operations.

Increasing numbers of farm women are engaged in off-farm employment, paralleling the increase in employment growth rates of all women. Nationally, 51 percent of females aged 16 or older are participating in the labor force. Participation by rural women is slightly less at 48 percent, but that figure is up five percentage points from 10 years earlier.

What significance does this labor force participation by women have for the farm? Specific figures are not available for South Dakota but an in-depth study of farm women conducted in Mississippi provides some data for illustrative purposes and as a point of reference. The figures for South Dakota are likely to be somewhat comparable to those in this study.

A sample of women from 29 counties in Mississippi and Tennessee was interviewed. About 40 percent of the farm women were employed off-farm, principally in full-time teaching, secretarial, and production-related occupations, and in sales and clerical positions.

In spite of being clustered in low paying jobs, farm women's off-farm earnings contributed significantly to total farm income. In this study, the contributions were measured in several ways. One way was to examine the relationship of women's off-farm employment with "below-poverty" household incomes. Twenty-nine percent of the farms with no women working off-farm were classified as being below-poverty, while only eight percent of the farms with women employed off-farm were so classified. Apparently, women's off-farm employment was instrumental in raising incomes of some farms above the poverty level.

Another measure used in this study was something called the "degree of dependence". This measurement refers to the ratio of women's off-farm earnings to total farm household income. The following table shows the degree of dependence for those families with positive total farm household income.

Table 1. Degree of Dependence on Women's Off-Farm Earnings in Farm Households, 29-County Mississippi-Tennessee Area, 1980

Degree of Dependence	Percent of Households
75.00 - 99.99	7
50.00 - 74.99	19
25.00 - 49.99	49
.01 - 24.99	24
NA	1
Total	100

Source: Salant, Priscilla. Farm Women's Contribution to Farm and Family. Ag Econ Res Rep., No. 14C. Miss. Ag & Forestry Exp. Station. March 1983.

These data show women employed off-farm contributed at least one-half of total farm household income for 26 percent of all the farms studied. Women's off-farm earnings contributed from one-quarter to one-half of total farm house-

hold income for nearly 50 percent of the households studied. For the total sample of farms, the average income per farm from farm sources was a loss of \$1,250. While this value would vary from year to year, we can clearly conclude that off-farm income was critical to the economic survival of the farms under study.

Most women in the above survey reported receiving some fringe benefits which are another important contribution from women's off-farm employment.

Do the examples and figures cited in this newsletter reflect the situation in South Dakota? There are no studies which can provide a definitive answer to that question. However, one can partially answer the question by looking at communities in South Dakota. Do you see situations similar to those noted above? Do you see more farm women working in town? Do you see more farm men accepting off-farm employment and women taking on more of the on-farm responsibilities? If the answer to these questions is yes, the findings reported in this newsletter undoubtedly have some relevance to South Dakota.

In summary, farm women make substantial contributions to the farm—as homemakers, farm operators, and farm laborers, and in off-farm employment. The mix of these roles has changed over time and undoubtedly will continue to evolve with changing technology and farm structure. Each of these roles is important. Farm women's contributions to their households are now being accorded more recognition by the general public.

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