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The Changing Role of Women in Agriculture

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The role of women in agriculture is rapidly changing. Women no longer perceive themselves only in the traditional role of rural homemaker or as an auxiliary source of labor for the agricultural sector. More and more, women are moving into management and decision-making roles. One reason may be the overall change in women's roles in society as a result of the feminist movement.

But an equally forceful reason may be the technological developments in agriculture which have eliminated many of the more tedious physical tasks. These technological developments have led to increased cash expenditures for inputs, higher-priced equipment, and larger farms—all of which have accentuated the need for careful record-keeping and better management practices. Women quite naturally have often taken over the task of record-keeping, putting themselves in a position to supply information needed to assist in management decisions. From there, women have logically moved into actual decision-making roles.

There are numerous examples of women who have been trained to accept and now fulfill such responsibilities. The October 17, 1981 issue of The Dakota Farmer, for example, has a story about two women who manage hog farrowing barns. A companion story relates how 160 Minnesota women attended a one-day training workshop on hog farrowing. These stories indicate that some women are venturing into areas heretofore reserved for men.

The Extension Service has seen a change in the role of women in the past ten years. Presently, only one county agent in South Dakota is female, but in the past a woman was an associate county agent and another woman was an agent-in-training. Three of the five current District Extension Supervisors—who supervise both county agents and home extension agents—are women.

Women are becoming more involved as grain merchandisers, floor traders, and USDA marketing employees. Because of their familiarity with farm records and because they closely follow home-family market conditions, many farm wives have also become the "marketers" for their family farm's produce. One specialist has remarked that women are better students of marketing because they seldom have inherited biases or ingrained habits that need to be broken.

What is perhaps most noteworthy is the increase in the number of women who are training for a wide range of jobs in the agricultural sector. Female enrollment in agricultural programs in colleges is showing considerable growth. A recent brochure distributed by the South Dakota State University College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences reported information from a survey of 1971 graduates of that college. Only 2 of the 158 graduates who responded were women. By contrast, in 1981, over 20 percent of the students in that college were women. Colleges of agriculture in other universities report even higher percentages of female students.

Females in the SDSU College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences can be found in almost every major. Of particular interest to the Economics News-letter are those majoring in agribusiness or agricultural economics. In 1977, none of the 49 seniors majoring in either of these two fields were females. In 1982, however, four of 60 seniors majoring in these fields are females.
A 1980 graduate found herself as the first female PCA loan officer in a Minnesota region. She reports that initial difficulties have been overcome and she is now accepted by both employer and clientele. Another recent graduate is an administrative manager in the feed division of a major grain company. A third works as an industrial engineer at one of the larger packing plants in the area.

The movement of women into predominantly male areas may well be slowed because of a lack of role models—females who are working successfully in various professions. A group of female agricultural economists became concerned about whether the small number of female teachers in agricultural economics departments would deter females from being motivated to enter the field. This group formed a committee to conduct a nationwide study on the status and opportunities for women in agricultural economics.

Results showed that women with graduate degrees in agricultural economics were employed in universities, research institutes, business, and government. Though the numbers were small, a definite core-nucleus of women is now in the profession. Further, the study shows an increasing number of female graduates enrolled in agricultural economics study programs. Between 1974 and 1979, for example, the number of women enrolled in full-time doctorate programs more than doubled—from 155 to 352.

As more women enter the working world, more female students will be exposed to female role models—whether as teachers, in government, in business, or as farm operators—and the students may well be motivated to follow in the footsteps of earlier entrants into the profession. They will then be trained to assume management positions and decision-making roles in agriculture, responding to changing needs in the industry. The experience in agricultural economics can almost certainly be cited in other disciplines associated with agriculture.

In summary, women are assuming a changing role in agriculture for a number of reasons—the changing role of women in society in general, technological change, and better training in agricultural disciplines. Equally important, barriers to women in agriculture are breaking down as more and more employers perceive that the modern young woman is as well-trained and dedicated as her male counterpart. It is the person, not the sex, that is important in determining whether a job will be well done.

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