

Women's Place in Agriculture

Farm Women. Work, Farm, and Family in the United States. RACHEL ANN ROSENFELD. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1986. xiv, 354 pp., illus. \$26. Institute for Research in Social Science Monograph Series.

Women's roles have long been ignored in the transformation of U.S. agriculture. The masculine connotation of "farmer" parallels the tendency in social science to assume that women on farms—as in the non-farm sector—are involved in a domestic and family sphere of operations that is separable from the productive enterprise. Recently both feminist critiques of traditional scholarship and the increasing numbers of women in the non-agricultural labor force have led to the questioning of that assumption.

This book is therefore a welcome addition to research on United States agriculture. It reports the findings of the first national survey of farm women ever conducted and provides a framework within which more localized studies, past and future, can be interpreted. The survey, funded by the Department of Agriculture, arose from "complaints that women were neither recognized as contributing to agriculture nor given equal access to resources provided to farmers" (p. 37). To conduct the survey, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago carried out telephone interviews with 2509 women farm operators and wives of farm operators and 569 male farm operators in the summer of 1980. Questions covered women's and men's farm, household, and off-farm work, management and decision-making roles, and participation in farm community organizations and the characteristics of the farm, the family, and the women and men themselves. *Farm Women* pulls together the results of this research from a variety of reports and hard-to-find papers.

Rosenfeld does a fine job of tackling the thorny issue of what constitutes "work." She creates a four-part matrix, using the location of the work (inside or outside the home) and whether or not the work is paid. Thus, her analysis addresses men's and women's contributions to farm and home-based businesses, off-farm jobs, domestic work and child care, and volunteer work in the community. In the household-based enterprise of the farm, boundaries of "work" and "family" are rapidly shown to be artificial.

The book illuminates some much-discussed and disputed aspects of farm wom-

en's lives. Are they really farmers? Most do not label themselves that way, but 55% consider themselves to be one of the main operators of the farm. Among the married women, 60% feel they could run the farm without their husbands.

Most women reported being involved at least occasionally in a range of the farm tasks, from plowing and planting (37%) to running farm errands (85%). Men tended to take care of the application of fertilizer, herbicide, and insecticide in 83% of the cases, perhaps because husbands preferred to do these dangerous tasks themselves than to risk the health of other farm members. As predicted by other studies, women tend to be excluded from the key tasks that link the farm to the market. Only 14% of the women said that they regularly made purchases for the farm, and only 15% regularly marketed farm products. Women from large farms tend to do a smaller range of farm tasks, which may reflect greater task specialization. Women are also less active in farm work when the operation produces only crops and no livestock. Though women are shown to be active in farm work, men rarely cross over into domestic tasks traditionally assigned to women.

Work for pay is an important strategy that has diversified the farmers' income sources in recent decades. It is interesting that 45% of the women reported working in a family or in-home business other than farming, a matter that has been little studied heretofore. Approximately 37% of the women surveyed (plus 48% of the men) were employed off the farm or had been in the last year. The women earned approximately 40% of what the men earned in their jobs, though this difference reflects hours worked as well as wage differentials. The occupational prestige ratings of men's and women's jobs are the same, however; over 40% of the women worked in professional service industries. These findings contradict suggestions by some researchers that farms may provide a low-wage "peripheral" labor market for industry. In fact, both farm men and farm women are slightly overrepresented in the more professional positions, a finding that suggests that better jobs are necessary to pull a farm person into the off-farm labor force. The study also suggests that women have the broadest involvement in farm tasks when they have no husbands or when only their husbands are employed off the farm.

Though there has been considerable re-

search on women's roles in farm decision making, the national data the study provides are particularly useful in evaluating this work. The survey also shows wide involvement in community activities for both men and women, but women are rarely leaders of agricultural organizations and much less likely than men to have served on committees, panels, and agricultural governing boards. Surprisingly, having an off-farm job, doing a greater range of farm tasks, and having school-aged children made it more likely that a woman would participate in community activities.

As with any questionnaire study, there are problems with regard to the adequacy of the data collected to answer the questions posed. For instance, 44% of the women in the survey reported recent business contacts with the major agricultural agencies. Such contacts suggest that women may be integrated into the information networks that allow farmers to cope with the "web of government" that has become so important to farming today. On the other hand, women in a central Illinois discussion group were reported to complain that they had to carry government forms back and forth for their husbands to sign. It may be that the women's contacts with agricultural agencies are more accurately considered part of their task of running errands for the farm and not a reflection of their participation in farm decision making.

One of the important contributions of *Farm Women* is that it provides a strong bibliographic resource for a number of research topics central to the study of U.S. agriculture today, such as patterns of off-farm employment and farm decision making. It also contributes to the broader literature on household economy and the relations of work, authority, and the developmental cycle in households and farms. Old assumptions of separate spheres by gender, male dominance, and female subordination have been replaced by a quest for greater refinement of data and analysis, in both developing and industrialized countries. How individual interests and family goals are balanced, within the context of ethnic and community traditions and the larger economic environment, has been of great recent interest across disciplinary boundaries in the social sciences. *Farm Women* paints with the broad strokes of aggregated national data, but it nevertheless clarifies the outline within which future researchers can detail the workings of the household economy and the lives of farm women in the United States.

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