

Farm Women: Some Contemporary Themes

Barbara J. Cooper

Volume 24, 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt24rr02>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Cooper, B. J. (1989). Farm Women: Some Contemporary Themes. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 24, 167–180.

Article abstract

This report examines some of the persistent themes in the social science literature about farm women since the middle of this century. It is one researcher's attempt to deal with the wide variety of perspectives from which farm women have been studied and to suggest the usefulness of some of the material for future scholarship.

Farm Women: Some Contemporary Themes

Barbara J. Cooper

THE FAMILY FARM HAS BEEN, and continues to be, one of the most mythologized institutions in North America. Despite technological changes and financial crises which have radically altered the reality of life on the farm, for many people a rather idyllic image persists of country roads and waving wheat fields. In an age when social change, in many instances, has been devastatingly rapid, it seems as though an element of North American society has invested collectively in a belief in the enduring nature of the family farm. Perhaps because of a too-distant perspective on the reality of farm life today, it is possible for non-rural people to envy the "basic" lifestyle of their rural counterparts, seeing it as self-directed, and removed from the hectic urban pace as well as the increasingly polluted urban environment.

Intricately woven into this myth are farm women. Their off-farm work, reproduction, and participation in the family enterprise are subsumed under "the family farm" — when they are acknowledged at all. Most articles about farm women rightly decry the lack of research about this segment of the population. A beginning has been made, however scanty, to redress the lack of a substantial literature, in the social sciences, on farm women. This paper has grown out of research notes prepared for a project concerned with the "political" nature of the activities of farm women.¹ The researcher's mandate was to prepare a bibliography of the North American literature written after 1950 about farm women. This paper is not presented as a comprehensive analysis of all the material.² Rather, it is an attempt to identify some of the themes which seemed to predominate in the literature, and to highlight some of the hypotheses which have been put forward in an effort to illuminate the lives of farm women.

One of the problems faced by researchers is the lack of homogeneity of this group. Among those dealing with the situation of farm women, there seems to be a growing awareness of the variety and scope of work performed by these individuals. Their involvement in the paid labour force off the farm, as well as their

¹Naomi Black and Gail Cuthbert Brandt are currently engaged in a study of farm/rural women in Quebec and France with a particular focus on their "political" awareness and activities. Central to their study is an understanding of what actually constitutes "political" involvement.

²A bibliography was, however, submitted to the authors as part of the researcher's work.

contribution to the running of the family enterprise, are both part of the complex picture that is emerging.³ Women work on farms as operators of machinery, as managers, labourers, landlords, and partners in widely different types of family-centred agricultural production units. Research indicates what has been ignored all too often: that farm women do not constitute a monolith.⁴ Not only are there differences in the size and nature of farming operations, there are "important differences between rural farm and non-farm women, whites and minorities, different social classes, and women in different family roles." Also worthy of note are the special circumstances of "unmarried daughters, single women who head households, and widows."⁵

The relatively small number of women who live and work on farms has perhaps been one reason for the lack of attention they have received. Farm women do not constitute a major sector of the North American female population. In the United States, only 2.8 per cent of the total rural female population lived on farms in 1978 as compared to 44 per cent in 1940,⁶ and the number of women in agriculture actually has decreased as part of the overall decline in the number of farms. Whereas in the mid-1960s, slightly more than a million women farmed, by 1980, 483,000 women over age 14 were employed in agriculture: approximately 1.4 per cent of the total employed female population and 15 per cent of all persons employed in farming occupations.⁷

In Canada, the female agricultural labour force constituted 2.6 per cent of the total female labour force in 1981,⁸ and accounted for 21 per cent of the entire agricultural work force.⁹ Although these statistics are only slightly higher than

³Wava Gillespie Haney, "Farm Family and the Role of Women," in Gene F. Summers, ed., *Technology and Social Change in Rural Areas* (Boulder 1983), 181.

⁴The need to examine the many facets of farm women's lives is reiterated by Pamela Smith, "What Lies Within and Behind the Statistics?" in *Growing Strong: Women in Agriculture* (Ottawa 1987), 123-208; Rachel Rosenfeld, *Farm Women* (Chapel Hill 1985); and Frederick H. Buttel and Gilbert W. Gillespie Jr., "The Sexual Division of Farm Household Labor: An Exploratory Study of the Structure of On-Farm and Off-Farm Labor Allocation among Farm Men and Women," *Rural Sociology*, 49 (1984), 183-209.

⁵Wava G. Haney, "Women," in Don A. Dillman and Daryl J. Hobbs, eds., *Rural Society in the U.S.: Issues for the 1980s* (Boulder 1982), 129.

⁶Janet L. Bokemeier, Carolyn Sachs, and Verna Keith, "Labor Force Participation of Metropolitan, Nonmetropolitan, and Farm Women: A Comparative Study," *Rural Sociology*, 48 (1983), 515. "In census prior to 1950, the urban population comprised all persons living in incorporated places of 2,500 or more inhabitants and areas (usually minor civil divisions) classified as urban under special rules relating to population size and density. To improve its measure of the urban population, the Bureau of Census in 1950 adopted the concept of the urbanized area and delineated boundaries for unincorporated places. The 1950 definition has continued substantially unchanged, except for minor modifications in 1960, the introduction of the extended city concept in 1970, and changes in the criteria for defining urbanized areas for 1980 so as to permit such areas to be defined around smaller centers. In all definitions, the population not classified as urban constitutes the rural population." [*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, (1986), 3].

⁷Jessica Pearson, "Women Who Farm: A Preliminary Portrait," *Sex Roles*, 6, (1980), 561.

⁸N. Cebotarev, W.M. Blacklock, and L. McIsaac, "Farm Women's Work Patterns," *Atlantis*, 11, (1986), 4.

⁹Pamela Smith, "What Lies Within," 136.

those for the United States, the reality is very different. Whereas the number of women in agriculture is decreasing in the U.S. as part of the overall decline in the number of individuals involved in farming, the number of Canadian women engaged in agricultural occupations has increased, despite a simultaneous decline in the total agricultural labour force. In fact, "no other single occupational group recorded as great a change in its composition by sex between 1921 and 1971."¹⁰

The fact remains, however, that farm women constitute a small percentage of the female population. Understanding the composition of their group is rendered very difficult by the lack of a consistent set of data. Not only have definitions of farm labour, and who might be included in it, changed over the years, but so has the perception of those who fill out the various census or other survey forms. Today, while women are more apt to be included somewhere in the data, it is not always clear where. The result is a general impression of trends which need a great deal of refinement through more precise investigation. The researcher is left with the dilemma of how to interpret and compare studies whose bases are often very different.

There is, as a result of these difficulties, a variety of approaches to the whole subject of farm women. The most recurrent theme to emerge in the last few years is the need to examine the farm woman within the context of her family. If one regards "family" as the pervasive element in the lives of most farm women,¹¹ it is possible to distinguish between the ideological rhetoric of family that has become such an important component of contemporary politics, and the reality of the family which provides the context in which farm women seek both occupational identity and personal fulfillment. Many farm women who become fully involved in the business operation of the family farm find themselves almost necessarily enmeshed in family relationships. This interpenetration of kinship and capitalism may well lead "to analytical and political confusion when farm women are studied through individualized models appropriate to urban women."¹² What some writers are beginning to recognize is that the family farm involves women on many levels and that peril awaits the scholar who too narrowly defines the scope of farm women's activities.¹³

When farm women are studied in the context of the family, the sexual division of labour is often emphasized. What emerges is the fact that almost all farm women are responsible at some time for outdoor work, and that virtually all farm women have the sole responsibility for household maintenance. While the size of the farm

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Frances Hill, "Farm Women: Challenge to Scholarship," *The Rural Sociologist*, 1 (1981), 371.

¹²*Ibid.* Hill goes on to say that she is not trying to suggest that urban women have no families or no concern for their families, but that they generally pursue their occupations outside the family context.

¹³The need to understand family interactions and relationships with regard to the division of labour is stressed by several authors, among whom are: Rachel Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*; Cornelia Butler Flora, "Farm Women, Farming Systems, and Agricultural Structure: Suggestions for Scholarship," *The Rural Sociologist*, 1 (1981), 383-6; Wava G. Haney, "Farm Family and the Role of Women," Buttel and Gillespie, "The Sexual Division of Farm Household Labor."

is a factor in determining the extent to which women are involved in the actual operation of farm equipment or the care of animals, there seem to be few, if any, variables which remove from women those tasks traditionally associated with the housewife.¹⁴

The value of examining the sexual division of labour is that the considerable contribution of women to the farm is documented. For example, with the development of more complex farming arrangements and the involvement of the government in farm marketing, a need has developed for more accurate and frequent accounting procedures. Those who study farm women are discovering that except in the large agribusinesses, women most often are the ones who assume this responsibility on the farm. Since they are also not likely to be responsible for the tax forms, their part in the process of record-keeping is apt to be overlooked.¹⁵

The attempt to piece together the many responsibilities of farm women is complex. One danger seems to be that some authors want to legitimize the myriad mundane activities that farm women do. The difficulty is that in effort to redeem various tasks, and assign to these their proper importance, scholars might, in fact, be distorting the reality. For example, one study of farm women's work patterns in Canada reported that 91.4 per cent of farm women questioned answer the phone on a regular or occasional basis. The study subsumed this activity under the heading of routine farm management.¹⁶ The implication is that the woman who answers the phone does so as the one responsible for farm business administration, or that she shares some such responsibility. The fact that the woman is the adult most frequently alone in the house and therefore most likely to be the one taking various calls is not mentioned. The intent here seems to be to say that what the woman does by handling phone calls and messages is an important aspect of farm management, which well might be. One wonders, however, whether farm women perceive this activity in this light, or as part of the general menial tasks which they perform simply because they are house-bound.

Although it is important that scholars consider the familial context in which a great deal of farming takes place, emphasis on the family does not preclude misunderstanding the dynamic at work within this social unit. In another study, the wives of high-success farmers were observed to can more food than wives of low-success farmers. The possibility that this work may have been economically advantageous to the family was ignored. Instead, the action of canning was presented as some effort to fulfill a perceived farm-wife role.¹⁷ Greater attention to the significance of various chores should help to clarify just how individual family members contribute to the whole farming enterprise.

¹⁴See Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*; Carolyn Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers* (Totowa 1983); Gisele Ireland, *The Farmer Takes a Wife* (Chealey 1983).

¹⁵This phenomenon is documented by Ireland, Rosenfeld, and Sachs. While the women does the daily or weekly accounting, it is likely that their husbands, or in some cases an accountant, will do the tax forms.

¹⁶Cebotarev, *et al.*, "Farm Women's Work Patterns," 9.

¹⁷Sachs, *Invisible Farmers*, 32.

The task of evaluating specific activities is, however, rather complicated. The term "crucialness"¹⁸ highlights the scholarly difficulty of evaluating the contribution of men's and women's work on the farm. Despite the awkwardness of the term, the concept (and an algebraic formula) has been suggested as a way to determine the relative importance of various tasks over time. It is argued that farm women's work is no less time-consuming than it ever was, but it is less crucial to the continued existence of the farm. By contrast, the work of farm men may, in fact, consume less time than it once did, but they find themselves in a situation where their decisions (often made alone) may put their entire enterprise at greater risk than decisions made when the whole market structure was less intimidating. Furthermore, technological improvements, particularly in the realm of the household, which are assumed to free women for more "meaningful" tasks, may not, in fact, do so. It would therefore seem important to determine the ways in which various technologies serve to reinforce, rather than minimize, the gender-based division of labour.¹⁹ In other words, the advent of the various labour- and time-saving household devices such as the automatic washing machine or microwave oven do not alter the fact that the "house" remains the responsibility of women; nor does the fact that women are thus "freed" mean that they will be involved thereby in the more "crucial" aspects of the farm. The efforts of some scholars to weigh the relative importance of work on the farm cautions others not to make facile assumptions about the way power is shared.²⁰

The need to identify and comprehend the family power relationships embedded in the process of decision-making has long been a theme in studies of farm women.²¹ This whole area of research seems to have grown in the 1950s as a result of American agricultural extension services that emphasized an approach known as "farm and home development" or the "farm and home unit approach" which stressed the importance of shared responsibility on the family farm.²² Eugene Wilkening, an American scholar and pioneer in this field of research, recognized that decision-making often was not a formal process and, in fact, that often one could barely distinguish the decision from its execution. Consequently, he and his colleagues sought to clarify the understanding between couples which underlay their decisions.²³ The findings of numerous studies over the years, in Canada as well as the United States, show little variation: on the whole, men and women are both involved in a decision making process, but men tend to make the decisions

¹⁸This notion is central to the work of Corlann G. Bush in "The Barn is His, The House is Mine: Agricultural Technology and Sex Roles," in George H. Daniels and Mark H. Rose, eds., *Energy and Transport* (Beverly Hills 1982), 235-59.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 257.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 258.

²¹Hill, "Farm Women," 375. Frances Hill suggests that this is perhaps the single aspect of farm women's lives that has generated a literature.

²²Sachs, *Invisible Farmers*, 30.

²³E. A. Wilkening and Denton E. Morrison, "A Comparison of Husband and Wife Responses Concerning Who Makes Farm and Home Decisions," in *Marriage and Family Living*, (August 1963), 350.

about the farm, especially production, while women dominate in the household arena.²⁴

It is the process of decision-making rather than the sum total of the decisions made which is important in studying farm women. This "process" includes the way in which something is actually chosen as an issue for decision-making. There is a great deal of control inherent in just deciding what is and what is not to be on the decision-making agenda.²⁵ It would seem, then, that inasmuch as farm women are excluded from decisions affecting the production and distribution of farm goods, they are also kept from a real share of the power.

Not all scholars perceive this division of power in the same light. In one study of land ownership and women's power in a midwestern American farming community, it is argued that it was possible for women to concede decision-making to men and manage to exert power by their choice of the man to whom they gave use of their land.²⁶ The women in this case, most of whom owned their own land through inheritance, were portrayed as willing to let the men they chose to marry run the farm in exchange for the assurance that the farm, thus made successful, would provide for them in their widowhood. The assumption seems to be that the women believed they would outlive their mates, and had a highly developed capacity for delayed gratification. This argument may have a certain persuasiveness for those who wish to believe that women are in control even when there are few external indicators of their influence. What it lacks is an understanding of the nature of power relationships. More likely, the power of women (in this case in the form of the right to manage the farm) is merely assumed or taken over by the men rather than being ceded by the women. One could argue also that the abrogation of their power is the price women pay to establish themselves in the socially acceptable and safe confines of a marriage.

Since the earliest focus for the contemporary analysis of the family farm was this issue of decision-making, an examination of the genesis of this concern sheds some light on the direction of much of the research. It can be argued that the goal of large-scale agricultural development, particularly in the U.S., influenced not only the questions asked by some scholars, but also some of their conclusions.²⁷ There seems to have been a concern that women would unduly influence their husbands in ways considered "unproductive." By implication, women constituted a possible menace in the unfolding of a certain agricultural plan.²⁸ The fact that

²⁴The findings of Rosenfeld do not differ substantially from those of Wilkening in this regard. See Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 138. Early work on Canadian farm families was done by Helen Abell, "Decision-making on the farm," *Economic Annalist*, 31 (February 1961), 7-9. See also Gisele Ireland, *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, 15 and Pamela Smith, "What Lies Within and Beyond the Statistics?", 165.
²⁵*Ibid.*, 139.

²⁶Sonya Salamon and Ann Mackey Keim, "Land Ownership and Women's Power in a Midwestern Farming Community," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41 (1979), 117.

²⁷Hill, "Farm Women," 375.

²⁸Barbara J. Sawyer, "Predictors of the Farm Wife's Involvement in General Management and Adoption Decisions," *Rural Sociology*, 38 (1973), 425. Sawyer argues that women's desire to be involved should be redirected so as not to interfere with progress.

such a concern may have inspired studies about decision-making suggests attention to their bias.²⁹

Even as one is mindful of the household as a dynamic entity, one must be cognizant of the importance of the family cycle in coming to an understanding of farm women's roles.³⁰ For example, scholars have often assumed that the women are most likely to be involved in various farm or volunteer organizations in the "empty-nest" stage of their lives.³¹ This assumption is based on the notion that women at this stage are less-encumbered with child-rearing responsibilities and have more 'free' time to devote to other interests. Other research fails to uphold this hypothesis and suggests that women who work off the farm, who have school-aged children, and who are involved in many activities, are more apt to accept positions of responsibility in the organizations of their choice.³² Greater sensitivity to the issue of life cycle in studies of farm women may allow for a finer sense of what women might be experiencing at different stages in their lives.

At the same time there are those who would warn against too great an emphasis on life cycle. One thesis is that life cycle is not a factor by itself in the on- or off-farm work of men or women, but that in the joint work-role situations, life cycle does come into play.³³ The difficulty is not having sufficient longitudinal data from which to generalize about life-cycle patterns of how farm households allocate their adult labour. From yet another point of view, it has been argued that, whereas "research on men tends to attribute changes in behaviour or attitudes to changes in the larger context, ... research on women attributes similar changes to life-cycle variations."³⁴ The problem from this perspective is the definition of women solely in terms of the family as family. Nevertheless, despite the acknowledged limitations of using the life cycle to explain the complexity of farm women's lives, the dimension of life cycle in the broader picture of life on the farm deserves greater attention.

One of the persistent dilemmas for the feminist scholar is the importance of class for all women, and farm women should be no exception. Indeed, the broader context always should provide the backdrop against which farm women are studied. Nevertheless, scholars have seemed to find it difficult to deal with the whole question of class as it applies to farm women. One theory is that it is basically the farm women who adapt the most to preserve the perceived class-interests of the

²⁹Helen Abell's work in the Canadian context also shows this concern with decision-making: "Decision Making on the Farm," *The Economic Annalist*, 13, (February 1961).

³⁰Hill, Rosenfeld, and Sachs all note the importance of understanding the stage of life cycle of farm women in coming to an appreciation of the kinds of on-farm and off-farm work they might be engaged in.

³¹Some of the research of Janet Bokemeier and John L. Tait reported in the article, "Women as Power Actors: A Comparative Study of Rural Communities," *Rural Sociology*, 45 (1980), 238-55, supports this hypothesis. Their evidence seems to be split between two groups, one of which had a majority of "empty-nesters" the most involved, and one which did not.

³²Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 32, 243.

³³Buttel and Gillespie, "The Sexual Division," 205.

³⁴Comelia B. Flora, "Farm Women," 383.

farm household, especially where there is a high degree of identification between the household and the production unit.³⁵ Clearly, "understanding the position of women on farms requires an understanding both of the economic forces operating upon the structure of agriculture in particular and of the position of women in society at large."³⁶ Still, this is one area in which scholarship has seemed rather faint of heart, shying away from the question of class-related issues among farm women whenever possible.

One facet of the structure of agriculture that merits attention is the development of what is called the "dual economy." Historically, support for the farming enterprise often has come from off-farm sources. Younger family members, often young women, were sent to work in the village, or later to the mills, and their pay was used to assist in the maintenance of the farm. Increasingly, after the 1920s, farmers themselves sought off-farm work merely to survive. For many it virtually was the only way to preserve their farms. In the mid-1950s, it had become apparent that part-time farming was not a passing phenomenon and social scientists sought to describe and analyze its impact on the broader economy. While there was a definite concern about the nature of the industry that might develop alongside agricultural areas to take advantage of this need for cash-generating employment, there was no emphasis on the gender of those who might be wanting to seek such jobs.³⁷

By the early 1970s, studies began to analyze the reality of the off-farm work of farm women.³⁸ It was found that rural women were entering the work force in growing numbers, as were their urban counterparts, and that their participation in the paid labour force was subject to the same structural constraints as those encountered by their urban peers. The importance of off-farm work to the survival of the family farm has continued to grow since the 1960s. One study of the effects of multiple job-holding on U.S. agriculture during the 1970s and early 1980s found that the majority of farm-family income has been from non-farm sources. Furthermore, income from members of the farm family other than the operator (especially the farm operator's spouse) has been rather consistently under-represented by various data-gathering attempts.³⁹ The implication, surely, is that farm women are not only becoming increasingly involved in off-farm labour, but possibly are shoring up a rather unsteady farm-income by this work. This phenomenon requires more careful study.

Statements made by farm women in various studies suggest that there are two

³⁵*Ibid.*, 385.

³⁶Sachs, *Invisible Farmers*, xi. This belief is reiterated in the Canadian context by Julie Lee, "Women as Non-Family Farm Workers," (Ottawa 1987) 91-122; Pamela Smith, "What Lies Within and Behind the Statistics?" and Suzanne Dion, *Les Femmes dans l'Agriculture au Québec* (Longueuil 1982).

³⁷An example is the article by Charles E. Bishop, "Part-time Farming and the Low Income Problem," *Journal of Farm Economics*, 37 (1955), 1428-35.

³⁸James A. Sweet, "The Employment of Rural Farm Wives," *Rural Sociology*, 37 (1972), 553-77.

³⁹Frederick H. Buttel and Oscar W. Larson III, "Political Implications of Multiple Jobholding in U.S. Agriculture: An Exploratory Analysis," *Rural Sociology*, 47 (1982), 273.

main reasons for them to seek off-farm employment: to earn money and to enhance their own sense of themselves as individuals. In this they are no different than their urban peers. In a study of farm women in Bruce and Grey Counties in Ontario, it was noted that 88% of those surveyed indicated that they worked for financial reasons; of these, 96% contributed all or part of their earnings to the farming enterprises.⁴⁰ Although working off the farm is often difficult simply because of the distances to be travelled, others have found that distance was not a deterrent when people wanted or needed to work.⁴¹ One of the difficulties with studies of the off-farm work of women is that insufficient emphasis is placed on the regional nature of studies done. Whether it is intentional or not, the reader is often left with the impression that one might be able to generalize on the basis of some of these studies. Nevertheless, such generalizations can be made only at the peril of ignoring rather specific conditions in many areas of the country such as distances to urban centres and the availability of work.

Studies have tried to determine who in a family will work off the farm. The number of variables include such factors as education, stage of life-cycle, marital status, number of dependent children, farm size and income, and the possibility of work. Despite the plethora of variables, one study has found that situations in which only the husband was employed off the farm "were those in which the farm was least developed and where more types of tasks were done by the woman."⁴² But the variations range from farms where no one works off the farm, to those in which both adults do.⁴³ The implication of all these studies for women is the way in which off-farm labour impinges on their existence. In all probability "women will be caught in a triple squeeze. Not only do they have to fill in for their part-time farming husbands on the land, but they themselves are increasingly entering the non-farm labor force ... and must moonlight their own farm work."⁴⁴

It would also seem to be important to consider factors such as sex-role stereotyping, and the very nature of the economic structure of the country when one considers where and why people work off the farm. While a too-rigid structuralist point of view is not particularly helpful, there is some merit in the argument that "structural barriers to occupation entry and mobility [also] keep young farm men and women from opting for other types of work and confine them to what is locally available rather than the weight of sex-role stereotyping."⁴⁵ Whether or not one can rule out the importance of sex-role stereotyping entirely, the constraints of the labour market seem to be a real problem for many farm women. Not all farm women, however, have to take the lowest-pay jobs. Half of the women in the study

⁴⁰Ireland, *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, 47.

⁴¹Bokemeier, Sachs, and Keith, "Labor Force Participation," 529.

⁴²Rosenfield, *Farm Women*, 184.

⁴³Coughenour and Swanson, "Work Statutes," 43.

⁴⁴Elise Boulding, "The Labor of U.S. Farm Women: A Knowledge Gap," *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, 7 (1980), 262.

⁴⁵Janet Bokemeier and Charles Perry, "Occupational Sex-Stereotyping and Rural Young Men and Women," *Rural Sociology*, 46 (1981), 730.

of Bruce and Grey counties who work off the farm do have professional occupations, mostly teaching and nursing.⁴⁶ Regional variations, then, may be very important in the availability of work for farm women and in the level of their remuneration. This, too, suggests the need for caution in generalizing about farm women from narrowly circumscribed local studies.

Bias, based on rather stereotypical images of men and women, has occasionally made its way into studies of the work of farm women. The fact that men work with and, perhaps more importantly, repair the heavy farm equipment is seen by some as an indication of their superior productivity.⁴⁷ This is deemed to make them more crucial to the farming operation. Clearly, however, women also operate the large equipment when they stay home to do the farm work while their husbands engage in off-farm labour. Not only are women capable of handling such "production technologies," but they most often combine this task with the operation of the household and child-care responsibilities as well. To minimize the "productivity" of this type of work shows an utter disregard for what comprises the family farm economy. Furthermore, the assumption that there is an inherent link between men and the machinery that makes them so "productive" completely ignores the fact that women are socialized to avoid what is mechanical. It may well be in their own best interests for men to preserve this notion about the innate mechanical inability of women, because once women not only can drive but fix equipment, they may no longer be content to use the inferior pieces of farm machinery when the need arises. "The pecking order would then be established by who got to the tractor first."⁴⁸

While the sexual division of labour is an acknowledged factor in both the realms of on- and off-farm labour, the link between these two has not been sufficiently explored. It can be argued that "there has not been achieved an integration of knowledge on the interdependent sexual division of labour in U.S. agriculture with regard to both on-farm and off-farm work."⁴⁹ This relationship is very important because it is the ability of the family farm to allocate labour and other inputs to the production process that has enabled it to survive in advanced industrial societies.⁵⁰ There is reason to pay attention to the ways in which the flexibility of the family farm is manifested differently on different types of farms. In one study, eight categories of farms ranging from the traditional ideal where both partners work on the farm, in what is considered a traditional configuration, to the sex-role differentiated model, in which both people work off the farm, emphasize the adaptive behaviour of farm families and the extent to which generalizations about women's on-farm and off-farm labour are hazardous to our understanding the role of farm women today.

⁴⁶Ireland, *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, 47.

⁴⁷Coughenour and Swanson, "Work Statuses."

⁴⁸Ireland, *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, 37.

⁴⁹Buttel and Gillespie, "The Sexual Division," 184.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 185.

Women who actually farm have attracted scholarly scrutiny less often than those who follow the more traditional female involvement in agriculture as wives of farmers.⁵¹ In both Canada and the United States, there has been an increase in the proportion of women who either are self-employed or hired as farm workers even as the number of males in these occupations is in decline.⁵² In a sense, one of the problems with regard to the study of women who farm is the fact that they have chosen an unconventional path. If, indeed, occupations can be seen as gender-validating, then women who choose to farm in what continues to be perceived as a male preserve challenge the usual notions of what is appropriate for their gender. Whether women farm because of economic necessity or preference for the life, it seems reasonable to argue that those who decide to farm must find a way to reconcile accepted notions of femininity with their involvement in agriculture.⁵³ There is a need for careful research on women who farm, not only with regard to background factors and socialization experiences, but also to their ability to "make it" in farming.

The economic difficulties faced by women who wish to farm are enormous. The report of the Status of Rural Women Project in Canada discusses the "ease" with which women can get farm credit.⁵⁴ Basically, this report paints a bleak and frustrating picture for the woman who wishes to get farm credit, because most financial institutions run by men do not think that women are a worthy risk; these bankers believe that women are unable to handle the rigour of a farming enterprise and that they will fail.

The importance of land-owning for women becomes very clear in the context of farm management. It can be argued that ownership of land is a reasonable indicator of one's ability to control an enterprise.⁵⁵ Until women can own the land they wish to farm or own part of the business into which they are integrated at marriage, their power to effect change is questionable. Nevertheless, attention might also be paid to those enterprises, such as communes or co-operatives, by which some women have sought to circumvent the pitfalls of the system.⁵⁶

⁵¹The problem of work choice is apparent here. Many women who are involved in the farming enterprise as those responsible for the home and children consider themselves "farmers" no less than those who work the land. Here I wish to refer to the latter.

⁵²Bokemeier and Tickamyer, "Labour Force Experiences," 52. This study suggests that during the 1970s there was a 34 per cent increase in the number of female farmers and farm managers. In Canada during the same period the increase was close to 16 per cent. See Pamela Smith, "What Lies Within and Behind the Statistics?" 138.

⁵³Jessica Pearson, "Women Who Farm: A Preliminary Portrait," *Sex Roles*, 6 (1980), 573.

⁵⁴Status of Rural Women Project, "Credit Where Credit is Due": *Women and Farm Credit in Canada* (Ottawa 1980). This report is not focused on women who farm per se. A second article prepared for the conference, *The Socioeconomic Status of Farm Women: An Overview*, also indicates the barriers to a woman's successful advancement in farming. Also Sachs, *Invisible Farmers*, 91.

⁵⁵Charles C. Geisler, William Waters, and Katrina L. Badie, "The Changing Structure of Female Agricultural Land Ownership," *Rural Sociology*, 50 (1985), 85.

⁵⁶Sachs, *Invisible Farmers*, 91. She cites a collective of Catholic lay women who have joined together to farm.

In the last few years, as the family farm has seemed to move to the brink of disaster on many fronts, there has been a renewed interest in organizations of farm men and women. In a recent study of how farm women in Canada are represented by the media, "the image of the agricultural woman as an important leader in political and farm organizations" emerges as the second most popular representation of Canadian farm women.⁵⁷ This may well be the result of media coverage of recent efforts of farming families to save their farms in difficult economic times. Whether or not this is, in fact, how farm women generally perceive themselves, one certainly gets the impression that farm women in different parts of the country want very much to attain knowledge and understanding of their position in relation to the government.⁵⁸

One particular difficulty with much of what has been written in the last twenty years with regard to the political strategies of farm women is its lack of historical perspective. When one reads the studies, one has the sense that women are only discovering politics or groups which support what they perceive to be the needs of farming communities. Groups like the Women's Institutes, or the Cercles de Fermières have been passed over because they are not seen as "political." They are assumed to be more concerned with crafts and teas than with any more "important" issues. While there may be individuals within those organizations of whom this might be true, it is also possible that a more-sensitive study of such groups would reveal a very real effort to lobby the government over the years on a number of issues.⁵⁹

At the root of this exclusion of some groups from consideration as political entities seems to lie the question about what constitutes "political" involvement. Whether or not one agrees with the objectives or strategies of women in the past who may have been "auxiliaries" to men's groups, or whose emphasis may have seemed entirely "social," at some point their understanding of what they were about needs to be carefully examined. Scholars would do well to incorporate studies of rural women in the past with their efforts to explain what motivates women today.⁶⁰

Despite this criticism, it appears that some scholars are asking interesting questions about the political involvement of farm women. One study addresses the notion that women traditionally have been thought of as "inferior, powerless and apolitical" and that to this point, their involvement in community issues has been

⁵⁷Status of Rural Women Project, *"The Invisible Püch Ford" or the Portrayal of Farm Women in the Canadian Media* (Ottawa 1980), 10. "Most of the press coverage portrayed agricultural women as members of the Women's Institutes or its French counterpart, Les Cercles de Fermières," 10.

⁵⁸This is particularly the case of women in Ontario who are profiled in the report of Molly McGhee, *Women in Rural Life: The Changing Scene* (Toronto 1984).

⁵⁹Such research is being done on the Cercles de Fermières in Quebec by Gail Brandt, Naomi Black, and Yolande Cohen. In a broader study, Gail Brandt and Naomi Black are examining the political activity of farm women's groups in Quebec and France.

⁶⁰One example of a historical portrait of farm women that might be useful is the article by Mary Kinnear: "'Do you want your daughter to marry a farmer?': Women's Work on the Farm, 1922," in Donald H. Akenson, ed., *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, 6 (1988).

deemed to be irrelevant to the decision-making process.⁶¹ It is noted that there is little consensus among theorists whether women "in politics have different bases of power, different styles of power, and in addition, different personal and social characteristics."⁶² The hypothesis that arises from these observations is that women are indeed becoming more powerful in the community because of "the increasing acceptance and concern with what have been traditionally women's issues (such as conservation, human rights, child care and welfare)."⁶³ What is suggested is not that rural women are becoming more skillful or finding greater access to the resources needed for political involvement, but that women's issues finally are politically "salient." There are several problems with this hypothesis. First, there is the possibility that as women continue to lobby and work toward the realization of some of their goals related to "their issues," they may be gaining the necessary experience to give them access to further decision-making. Second, it is not clear why men have not tried to take over these "women's issues" in order to extend their own power. To reduce the ability of women to gain and use political power to the fashionableness of the causes they espouse does not really do justice to the question of the political activities of women.

Many farm women are involved in volunteer activities besides their regular chores. Some work on farm women deals with those women who are likely to involve themselves in unpaid organizational work. One such study concludes that women from larger farms, who probably are not involved in off-farm work, are most likely to take part in such activity.⁶⁴ This observation begs the question about whether this type of voluntary activity may denote status within the community. It is possible that men and women who run large operations have a particular sense of their own success (regardless of their debt) and of their ability to contribute to the betterment of the community. It is also conceivable that this may be a means of protecting their own interest in community affairs.

A further question about the political activity of farm women and men is raised when one considers the influence that off-farm work may have on them. One study addresses the possibility that off-farm labour involves a process of proletarianization which could make farmers more critical of prevailing institutional arrangements.⁶⁵ One hypothesis is that as the off-farm workers come in contact with the realities of the "workplace," they might develop a "labour" attitude which could lead to dissatisfaction with the distribution of land. The converse of this argument is that private ownership of property, and the fact that this group (most particularly those whose off-farm labour is in the white-collar sector) enjoys a higher than average income, give them a certain degree of insulation from the instability of

⁶¹Janet Bokemeier and John L. Tait, "Women as Power Actors: A Comparative Study of Rural Communities," *Rural Sociology*, 45 (1980), 251.

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴Rosenfeld, *Farm Women*, 243.

⁶⁵Buttel and Larson, "Political Implications," 277.

product prices and thus would tend to make them conservative in their political stance. In fact, it is believed that "the trend toward the increased prevalence of part-time farming may serve to blunt the critical thrust that one might otherwise expect to arise from increasing inequality of land ownership and land holding."⁶⁶ The question becomes how these part-time farmers can protect what they perceive to be their best interests - interests not necessarily shared by those whose main livelihood is from the land. This puts the political activity of farm women in a rather interesting perspective. Scholars will have to be attentive to the specific demands of farm women, and willing to allow for considerable diversity of political sentiment.

The complexity of the situation in which the farm woman is enmeshed makes it difficult for any one scholar to hold all of the threads about unravelling the myth. During the past thirty years many scholars have tried to explain the farm woman from various points of view.⁶⁷ The literature is full of the importance of what farm women do both on and off the farm, and its cost in personal and familial terms. Some were motivated in this by a concern that any off-farm activity for women heralded the end of the farm family as it had been known; others wanted to document this change and to indicate that the farm family was not what had been assumed and that farm women need not be locked into it. Some were concerned with the economic implications of the work of farm women. Others sought to explore the sociological meaning behind the changes in the family farm.

In the end, it is important to remember that farm women are more than mere subjects in a study.⁶⁸ Current research techniques allow us to amass more data on these women than has ever been gathered before. At the same time, we must be careful to recognize the myth of the family farm in all its forms, even as it is enfolded in the farm women themselves. Finally, there is no better research tool than the ability to listen to what farm women can tell us about their own experience. Perhaps it is from there (before one even looks at census data) that a more complete understanding of farm women can emerge.

I would like to thank Susan Houston for her encouragement and assistance with this paper. I would also like to thank Nora Campbell and Ruth Brouwer for their suggestions and comments on an earlier draft, and Naomi Black and Gail Brandt for the chance to be involved in the project.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 277.

⁶⁷Boulding, "The Labor of U.S. Farm Women," 266. See also Sarah Elbert, "The Challenge of Research on Farm Women," *Rural Sociologist*, 1 (1981), 387 and Cornelia Butler Flora, "Discarding the Distaff: New Roles for Rural Women," in Thomas R. Ford, ed., *Rural U.S.A.: Persistence and Change* (Ames, Iowa 1977), 179.

⁶⁸This point is well made by Elcise Murray in "Factors Guiding Research on Farm Women," *Rural Sociologist*, 1 (1981), 391-4.