

Farm Women's Attitudes Toward Change in Work and Family Roles¹

HARRIETT K. LIGHT², RUTH E. MARTIN³, AND DORIS HERTSGAARD⁴

Society is experiencing rapid change in work and family roles. In order for schools to prepare students for these changes, knowledge of the families' attitudes toward such changes is necessary because the parents' influence on children is significant. Rural families have traditionally held more conservative views than urban families. However, there is some indication that the traditional conservatism of rural areas is giving way to increasingly liberal attitudes. This paper presents the findings of a study to assess the attitudes of 715 respondents from 2000 randomly selected farm women toward change in work and family roles. Significant differences in attitudes of women were found according to their age, number of children, and religious preference. Generally, attitudes regarding family roles were more conservative than were attitudes regarding career roles.

"A skillful housewife is the first requisite for the comfort and success of every household, but the farm housewife is an especially important factor in the family life" [11].

Attitudes toward changing roles for women have been the subject of numerous recent studies. Generally, the studies have shown that attitudes are becoming increasingly less traditional and are influenced by sociodemographic variables [5; 9; 10; 14]. In a recently published study [2], it was reported that the women's movement has reached working class women and is generally supported by them. These studies, however, were conducted primarily with urban women. The purpose of the present study was to determine the farm women's attitudes toward changing roles and factors that appear to influence their attitudes.

Background

Traditionally, the attitudes of rural residents have been portrayed as being more conservative than the attitudes of urban residents. Conservatism about moral and family issues appears to be especially pronounced [7; 16]. However, Kain and Divecha [6] caution that rural women cannot be assumed to be a homogeneous group, with identical attitudes toward changing family roles. Several variables, including religious affiliation, educational level and employment status can be expected to influence rural women's attitudes.

Much of the interest in attitudes toward changing roles focuses on the work and family responsibilities of males and females [13]. One of the most significant trends in American society has been the evolution of the role of women from traditional homemaker to a role that encompasses labor force participation in addition to

household and family responsibilities [3; 12]. Employment has been found to influence women's attitudes toward changing roles. Women who are employed or have recent employment experience are less traditional in their attitudes [2; 9].

Along with their urban counterparts, an increasing number of rural women are employed outside their home. In 1979, 44% of farm women and 47% of rural non-farm women were employed outside the home. This represents a 100% increase of rural employed women in the last 20 years and it is expected that this trend will continue. According to the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., by 1990 at least 70% of all women, ages 18 to 54 will be in the labor force [12]. The income of employed women is becoming increasingly crucial to farm families, in view of the stressful economic difficulties currently facing agriculture [15].

Well-educated women have more egalitarian sex-role attitudes than their counterparts with less education. This appeared to be especially true for women who have completed college [8; 9; 14]. Likewise, women whose husbands are relatively well educated have less traditional attitudes than women whose husbands have lower levels of education [2; 9]. Other factors related to attitudes include church attendance and Protestant religious identification. These factors were found to preserve more traditional attitudes [14].

Methods

Procedure

Names of 2,000 farm residents were randomly selected from a list of all farm owners in the midwestern state in which this study was conducted. A packet of research in-

¹Funded by The American Home Economics Foundation, North Dakota Committee on the Status of Women, North Dakota State University College of Home Economics Research Fund and the North Dakota State University Agricultural Experiment Station.

²From Child Development/Family Relations, North Dakota State University.

³From Home Economics Education, North Dakota State University

⁴From Mathematical Sciences, North Dakota State University

struments, a cover letter of explanation of the project, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope were mailed to each selected name. A time limit of six weeks for return of the instruments was arbitrarily set. Seven hundred and fifteen usable, completed packets were returned in that time and provide the data for this study.

Subjects

The seven hundred fifteen female subjects resided on farms or ranches at the time they completed the research instruments. Their average age was 44.6. The majority (97%) were married. The average length of marriage was 22.1 years, and only 1.6% were divorced, widowed or separated. They had an average of 3.2 children and their average annual family income was \$48,000. These women had an average of 12.7 years of formal education; their husbands had an average of 11.4 years. Twenty-five percent were employed off the farm or ranch. Ninety-three percent reported that they were involved with the work on the farm or ranch, e.g., operating equipment, caring for livestock, bookkeeping and/or running errands for "the men."

Research Instruments

The Attitudes Towards Autonomy for Women Inventory (ATAWI) [1], a Likert-type scale, was used to determine sex-role attitudes. The self-administered inventory contained 10 statements about current issues related to

women's sex roles. Each item consisted of a declarative statement for which there were four response alternatives: Agree Strongly, Agree Mildly, Disagree Mildly, and Disagree Strongly. Each was scored 1, 3, 5, or 7 with 1 representing the choice reflecting the most traditional, conservative attitude and 7 reflecting the most liberal, pro-feminist attitude. Throughout the paper, favorable or positive attitudes toward changing roles will be referred to as pro-feminist. Thus, total scores ranged between 10 and 70 with high total scores reflecting a strong egalitarian attitude. Scores from 10 to 25 were considered "conservative" in attitudes regarding autonomy, scores of 26 to 54 were considered "moderate," and 55 to 70 were "liberal" in their attitudes toward autonomy for women. The test-retest reliability of the ATAWI has been reported as .78 [1].

Socio-demographic variables were identified in the literature as potentially relevant to women's sex-role attitudes. A questionnaire was used to gather data pertaining to these variables: women's educational level, husbands' educational level, employment status, religious preference, church attendance and number of children.

Results

The 10 statements and the average response for each statement are shown in Table 1. Responses are coded from 1 to 7 with 7 corresponding to the pro-feminist attitude and 1 the conservative attitude. The statement which generated the highest percentage of agreement was

Table 1
Percentage of Rural Women Indicating Pro-feminist Attitudes to Individual Statements

Statement	Mean N = 715	Conservatives N = 232	Moderates N = 292	Liberals N = 191	Combined N = 715
1. The word "obey" should be removed from the marriage service.	4.09	26.2	52.6	86.2	53.4
2. Girls should be trained as homemakers and boys for an occupation suited to their talents.	4.62	31.0	65.05	89.8	61.1
3. The initiative in courtship should come from men.	3.20	15.8	27.6	55.3	31.5
4. A woman should expect just as much freedom of action as a man.	5.89	75.8	93.5	100.0	89.9
5. Women should subordinate their career to home duties to a greater extent than men.	3.43	14.7	27.8	64.5	33.8
6. Motherhood is the ideal "career" for most women.	4.05	26.2	46.5	85.3	50.8
7. A woman has the same right as a man to retain the same name after marriage.	3.54	24.2	41.3	75.0	45.2
8. The husband should be regarded as the legal representative of the family group in matters of law.	3.56	20.6	35.5	69.0	39.9
9. The decision whether to seek an abortion should rest with the wife.	2.79	17.2	27.5	41.0	28.1
10. Her sex should not disqualify a woman from an occupation.	5.69	62.6	85.5	96.5	81.3

Footnote: Differences are significant at $p=0.0001$ for all statements.

associated with career direction, "women should expect just as much freedom of action as a man." In a parallel statement, over 80% of the respondents agreed that gender should not inhibit a female from any occupation. Similarly, over 60% disagreed that "girls should be trained as homemakers." About one-third (33.8%) of the respondents disagreed that "women should subordinate their careers to home duties to a greater extent than men."

Four items focused on family-related issues. Over half (53.4%) the respondents agreed that "the word 'obey' should be removed from the marriage service." A similar statement related to retaining the maiden name following marriage with almost half (45.2%) agreeing with retaining the maiden name. Two statements concerned with the traditional role of the male (the male should be the initiator in courtship, and the legal representative of the family should be the husband) drew relatively conservative responses (68% and 60% agreed, respectively). The statement which received the lowest percent of agreement (28.1%) focused on the wife having the right to make the decision on seeking an abortion.

To establish differences between women with pro-feminist attitudes and those with more traditional attitudes, total scores on the ATAWI were examined. This sample of rural women averaged 39.43 on ATAWI; the first quartile total score was 32 and the third quartile score was 48. The 231 (32.3%) who scored 32 or less were labeled as "conservative" and the 192 (26.9%) who scored 48 or above were termed "liberal." The remaining 292 women (40.8%) were labeled "moderate." Arnatt [1] classified a total score of 25 or less "conservative" and a score of 55 or more as "liberal." Sixty (8.4%) of the respondents in this study were "conservative" by Arnott's

definition and only 34 (4.8%) "liberal."

Discriminant analysis is a statistical technique which allows the study of the differences between two or more groups with respect to several variables simultaneously. A stepwise procedure is used to select the most useful discriminating variables, i.e., those variables that measure characteristics on which the "liberal" and "conservative" group differ. Significant differences in women's sex role attitudes were found according to the women's age ($F=60.476, p=0.0001$); the number of children ($F=5.083, p=0.0247$); religious preference (Catholic: $F=6.067, p=0.0142$; Lutheran: $F=5.368, p=0.0210$); frequency of church attendance ($F=8.203, p=.0044$); frequency of visiting friends ($F=7.802, p=0.0055$); and frequency of visiting relatives ($F=2.609, p=.1070$).

The average age of the conservative group was 48.42 whereas the average age of the liberal group was 39.90. The conservative group had more children with an average of 3.77 to an average of 2.80 for the liberal group. The conservative group was 22% Catholic and 57% Lutheran. Eighty-seven percent of the conservative group attended church at least once a month; 75% of the liberal group did. Means for all three groups are displayed in Table 2. Income, education, husbands' education and the woman's employment off the farm or ranch were not significant.

Table 1 lists the percentage of each category (conservative, moderate, liberal) holding the pro-feminist view of each statement. The greatest differences occurred on the statements regarding "removing obey from the marriage ceremony," "girls should be trained to be homemakers," and "motherhood is the ideal career." The greatest agreement occurred on two statements: a majori-

Table 2

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Rural Women Grouped by Arnott's Attitudes Toward Women Scale

	Conservative Score≤32	Moderate 32>Score≤48	Liberal 48>Score
Average Age	48.20	44.67	39.90
Average number of children	3.77	2.96	2.80
% Catholic	22	28	26
% Lutheran	41	44	57
% who attend church at least once a month	87	83	75
% who frequently visit friends who do not live nearby	16	18	11
% who frequently visit neighbors	43	49	51
Average income	\$49,750	\$43,651	\$39,903
Average education	12.51	12.50	13.24
Average husband's education	11.10	11.48	12.07
% Employed	23	24	38

Table 3
Average Categorical Response to Questions Grouped by Family and Career Related

	N*	Mean	Standard Deviation	T for H ₀ : Difference	Prob T
Conservative					
Career Questions	210	3.85	1.27	16.34 (n = 189)	0.0001
Family Questions	202	2.50	1.32		
Moderate					
Career Questions	304	4.96	0.83	20.94 (n = 279)	0.0001
Family Questions	283	3.43	0.61		
Liberal					
Career Questions	197	6.01	0.72	16.94 (n = 193)	0.0001
Family Questions	193	4.77	0.56		

* Sample sizes differ due to missing data.

ty of all groups agreed that "women should expect just as much freedom" and less than half agreed with the statement that the "decision to seek an abortion should rest with the wife."

The ten statements were subdivided into the four dealing with careers (2, 4, 5, and 10) and the six dealing with family (1, 3, 6, 7, 8 and 9). The rural women in this study averaged significantly higher (mean = 4.92, *sd* = 1.26, *N* = 711) on the four career related statements than on the family-related statements (mean = 3.53, *sd* = 1.24, *N* = 678); (*t* = 31.30, *p* < .0001). The same pattern held when women were subdivided into conservative, moderate and liberal groups based on ATAWI. The women in all three groups scored significantly higher (more pro-feminist) on the career-related statements (*p* < .0001). See Table 3.

Discussion

According to the results of this study, it appears that contrary to some contemporary thought the majority of the rural women subjects of this study could be described as having moderate rather than conservative attitudes toward changing roles in work and family and one-fourth could be described as liberal in their attitudes. However, those farm women who were liberal appeared to have some distinguishing characteristics that are similar to those identified previous studies. They were younger, had fewer children and attended church less frequently.

The farm women in this study did not appear to be influenced in their attitudes by several of the variables that had been identified by previous researchers [2; 14]. The farm women in the present study were not influenced by family income, their educational level, their employment outside the home or their husband's educational level. The women classified as liberal were younger, as were employed rural women. Younger rural families tend to have smaller incomes and tend to be better educated.

The statement that drew the least pro-feminist attitudes

from all the subjects was in regard to the wife having the decision whether or not to seek an abortion. Only about one-fourth of the subjects agreed with that statement. In contrast, the statements concerning the women's freedom of action being the same as men's freedom of action and that a woman should not be disqualified from holding any job on the basis of her sex drew the highest percentage of pro-feminist responses. Because the type of action was not specified, it is, therefore, difficult to determine exactly to what the subjects were referring. One might assume, however, that the action might be of a general nature and apply, for instance to career issues as well as to the homemakers who wish to have a "night out," just as her husband may have a "night out." The statement referring to women not being disqualified from a job is an indication of the apparent acceptance of less traditional attitudes in the career field. In comparison, two statements related to the traditional role of the male, i.e., the male being the initiator of courtship and the husband being the legal family representative, drew relatively traditional responses. It seems that the farm women in this study are more pro-feminist (liberal) in their attitudes toward career issues than they are in their attitudes toward family issues.

In conclusion, based on the results of this study, farm women are relatively moderate in their pro-feminist attitudes. However, several factors do appear to influence their attitudes. Emerging as critical factors are age, number of children and frequency of church attendance.

References

1. Arnott, C. Husbands' attitude and wives' commitment to employment. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1972, 34(4), 673-684.
2. Ferree, M.M. The women's movement in the working class. *Sex Roles*, 1983, 9(4), 493-505.
3. Harriman, L.C. Families in the 1980's: Issues and Con-

- cerns. *Journal of Home Economics*, 1982, 74(2), 31-35.
4. Helwig, J.T., & Council, K.A. *SAS User's Guide 1979 Edition*. Cary, NC: SAS Institute, 1979.
 5. Herzog, A., Backman, R., & Backman, J. *Sex role attitudes among high school seniors: Views about work and family roles*. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, 1982.
 6. Kain, E.L., & Divecha, D.J. *Rural women's attitudes toward social change in work and family roles*. Paper presented at St. Paul, MN at the National Council on Family Relations, October, 1983.
 7. Larson, O.F. Values and beliefs of rural people. In T.R. Ford (Ed.), *Rural USA: Persistence and change*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1978, pp. 91-112.
 8. Mason, K.O., & Bumpass, C. U.S. Women's sex role ideology, 1970. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1975, 80, 1212-1219.
 9. Mason, K.O., Czajka, J., & Arber, S. Change in the U.S. women's sex role attitudes, 1964-1974. *American Sociological Review*, 1976, 41, 573-597.
 10. Roper Organization, Inc. *The Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Poll. Volume III: A survey of attitudes of women on marriage, divorce, the family and America's changing sexual morality*. New York: The Roper Organization, 1974.
 11. Salm, M. Traveling cooking schools for rural regions, in Germany. *Journal of Home Economics*, 1909, 1(2), 164-167.
 12. Schaevitz, M., & Schaevitz, M. Dual-career families. *JC Penney Forum*, September, 1983.
 13. Smith, A., & Farris, C. *Pioneering programs in sex equity: A teacher's guide*. Arlington, VA: American Vocational Association, 1980.
 14. Thornton, A., Alwin, D., & Camburn, D. Causes and consequences of sex-role attitudes and attitude change. *American Sociological Review*, 1983, 48, 211-227.
 15. Walters, C.M., Murray, C.I., McHenry, P.C., & Hamdorf, K.G. Rural women's satisfaction with dual-work life styles. *Ohio Report*. Jan.-Feb. 1983, 7-8.
 16. Wilkening, E.A. Farm families and family farming. In R.T. Coward & W.M. Smith, Jr. (Eds.), *The family in rural society*. Boulder: Westview, 1983, pp. 27-33.